

For many people, race is the most powerful aspect of identity. Certainly, it is among the most complex and controversial ways that we define ourselves and each other. The history of relations among races, not just in the United States but around the world, is an often sobering story of conflict, discrimination, and violence. In the United States, the legacy of slavery seems to influence any discussion of race, and very often, discussions of race relations and racial identity focus on

# Who Invented *White* People?

what it means to be Black in America. But in the past decade or so, a number of scholars and social critics have argued that when it comes to addressing the complexities and problems associated with race, we should be focusing attention not exclusively on Blacks or Latinos or Native Americans or people of color; rather, we should be looking at Whiteness. One of those scholars is Gregory Jay (b. 1952), a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Like many other scholars interested in understanding race, Jay believes that the way we tend to discuss issues related to race makes Whiteness invisible. Whenever we discuss race, we discuss people of color but not Whiteness itself. And that's a problem, he believes, because it assumes that Whiteness is the standard by which other races are understood. In other words, according to Jay, when we examine how various racial categories are understood, we also have to look at Whiteness as a racial category; to avoid examining Whiteness as a racial category is to give it special status. In this way, how we discuss race both conveys and reinforces certain messages about the status of various racial categories.

In his provocative essay, which was originally delivered as a speech on (continued)

## GREGORY JAY

*“What is it for? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’?”*

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

**T**his week we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. day. What should our celebration focus on, and how can we best continue the work that he began? For most of us, Dr. King represents the modern Civil Rights Movement. That Movement was a struggle against the legal and social practices of racial discrimination—against everything from separate drinking fountains, white and colored public bathrooms, and segregated schools and lunch counters to the more subtle, everyday prejudices of ignorance and injustice that are common in America. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 is among Dr. King's greatest legacies, transforming the face of America more decisively than al-

GREGORY JAY, “WHO INVENTED WHITE PEOPLE” FROM SPEECH GIVEN BY GREGORY JAY, [HTTP://WWW.UWM.EDU/%7EGJAY/WHITENESS/WHITENESSTALK.HTM](http://www.uwm.edu/%7EGJAY/WHITENESS/WHITENESSTALK.HTM) REPRINTED BY PERMISSION.

(continued) *Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 1998, Jay explores how the racial category of White emerged from historical and cultural developments. He argues that only by understanding “where White people came from” can we hope to address longstanding conflicts and injustices associated with race. It is a challenging task, one that reminds us that there are profound consequences to how we define others.* ■

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**CONTEXT: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY** Jay uses Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as the occasion for his examination of whiteness. Although there seems to be an obvious connection between a holiday that celebrates the famous civil rights leader and a discussion of race, the matter is more complex than it might seem. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day has been a U.S. national holiday since 1986, but it remained controversial for a number of years. Some states resisted declaring the holiday, notably Arizona, which did not approve the holiday until 1992; New Hampshire, which changed its “Civil Rights Day” to “Martin Luther King, Day” in 1999; and Utah, which changed “Human Rights Day” to “Martin Luther King, Jr. Day” in 2000. Consider how Jay relies on the complex historical background to this holiday in making his argument. Consider as well how the historical context might influence the way readers might respond to Jay’s argument.

most any other legislation since the Civil War. Dr. King gave his life for the fight against injustice, and as we survey the changes in the thirty years since then we must say that his was a great and glorious victory.

Yet the promised land still eludes us. Once the crude legal structures of discrimination were torn down, Americans faced the fact that changing the laws did not change the feelings and beliefs of individuals, black or white. Beyond the abstract words of law and legislation, real people continued to carry with them the history of racism, whether as victims of its horrors or as beneficiaries of its privileges. To this day, racial discrimination remains pervasive in America. The old-boy networks at major corporations ensure the continuation of white male dominance. Banks regularly discriminate against minorities in business and housing loans. Homeowners and apartment owners refuse to sell or rent across color lines, partly because of the threats and violence that still occur when they do. Parents express discomfort or outright rage when children love or marry across the lines of race. Government subsidizes white suburban life with everything from freeway construction and business tax exemptions to mortgage write-offs while starving urban neighborhoods and cutting welfare programs. Ivy league schools give preference to the children of alumni and wealthy donors for admission, which, given the fact that the alumni and donors are overwhelmingly white, means that white applicants have an artificially easy time getting into the best colleges, and thus into the best jobs. It is hard to have many alumni of color, after all, when in the past colleges refused to enroll people of African or Asian or Hispanic descent, and placed strict quotas on Jews as well. Most of us could pluck similar examples out of the newspaper every day. This is not the legacy that Dr. King envisioned when he stood on the mountain top and saw his dream.

What keeps racism alive in America? I don’t pretend to be the one to know the answer to this question. It’s a question, however, that every one of us needs to ask. We need to ask it not only of ourselves, looking into our hearts, but to ask it of each other—to ask our friends, our family, our coworkers, and our church members. But in talking about race, what, exactly, should we talk about? I want to propose today that we talk about whiteness. Too often in America, we talk about race as if it were only something that people of color have, or only something we need to talk about when we talk about African Americans or Asian Americans or American Indians or Latino Americans. One thing that has changed radically since the death of Dr. King is that most white people do not want to call themselves white people, or see themselves in racial terms. From the days of the founding fathers until the Civil Rights movement, “white” was a common term in the law as well as society. Federal, state, and local officials regularly passed laws containing the word “white,” defining

everything from slavery and citizenship to where people could sit on a bus. Today, the movement against racism has had the unexpected effect of letting whiteness off the hook. Over and over we hear people say that “race shouldn’t matter,” that we should, or even do, have a “color blind society.” What has happened, I think, is that we have instead created a blindness to whiteness, or been blinded by whiteness itself. As the title of Cornel West’s best selling book insists, *Race Matters*, and to that I would add that whiteness still matters the most.

The trouble, then, with the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, with Black History Month, and such token expressions of concern is that they once more ghettoize the question of race. Worse, they tend to make race a black matter, something that we only discuss when we talk about African Americans, as if they were the only ones with a race. By distracting our glance, such tokenism once more blinds us to the race that is all around us, to what Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick*, called “the whiteness of the whale.” The great white whale of racism is a white invention. It was white people who invented the idea of race in the first place, and it is white people who have become obsessed and consumed by it until, like Captain Ahab, they have become entangled so deeply in pursuing its nature that they self-destruct in the process. As the Nobel prize winning black author Toni Morrison has argued, in her wonderful book titled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Melville and the other great writers of the American tradition tell the story of whiteness over and over. White identity defines itself against the backdrop of an African or colored presence: Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick*, Huck and Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, right on up through Bill Cosby and what’s-his-name on *I Spy* or any number of black-white buddy films in Hollywood. Ironically, white Americans can only define themselves by comparison to that which they are not, and so whiteness depends on blackness for its very definition.

5 Where did white people come from, anyway? Who invented whiteness? Scholars of race generally agree that the modern meaning of whiteness emerges in the centuries of European colonialism and imperialism that followed the Renaissance. Now granted, human beings have always clustered themselves in groups—families, clans, tribes, ethnic populations, nation states, etc.—and these groups have regularly been the source of discrimination and violence. At times it seems that an “us versus them” mentality starts on every playground and extends into every neighborhood, society, and government. Since human beings appear to require a sense of identity, and since identity is constructed by defining whom and what you are different from, it may be that the politics of difference will never be erased from human affairs.

That said, why did something called “racial” difference become so important in people’s sense of their identity? Before the age of exploration, group differences were largely based on language, religion, and geography. The word “race” referred rather loosely to a population group that shared a language, customs, social behaviors, and other cultural characteristics—as in the French race or the Russian race or the Spanish race (differences we might now call “ethnic” rather than “racial”). As European adventurers, traders, and colonists accelerated their activities in Africa and Asia and the Americas, there emerged the need to create a single large distinction for differentiating between the colonizers and the colonized, or the slave traders and the enslaved. At first, religious distinctions maintained their preeminence, as the Africans and American Indians were dubbed pagans, heathens, barbarians, or

savages—that is, as creatures without the benefits of Christian civilization or, perhaps, even as creatures without souls. Efforts to Christianize the Indians and the Africans, however, were never separate from efforts to steal their lands or exploit their labor. To justify such practices, Europeans needed a difference greater than religion, for religious justification melted away once the Indian or African converted.

Now the European had always reacted a bit hysterically to the differences of skin color and facial structure between themselves and the populations encountered in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (see, for example, Shakespeare's dramatization of racial conflict in *Othello* and *The Tempest*). Beginning in the 1500s, Europeans began to develop what became known as "scientific racism," the attempt to construct a biological rather than cultural definition of race. Biological races were said to predict and determine the cultural traits of peoples, so that cultural differences could be "explained" on a "scientific" basis. Scientific racism divided the world's populations into a few large species or groups. By the nineteenth century, race scientists settled on the term "Caucasians," first used as a synonym for Europeans in 1807, probably because the term's association with the Near East and Greece suited white people's desire to see themselves as having originated in the Golden Age of Classical Civilization. Caucasian usually appeared in a list of "major" race groups including also Mongolian (people of Asian descent), Ethiopian (people of African descent), and American Indian.

The fantasy of a "white race" with historical origins in Classical Civilization white-washed the complexion of Greece and Rome (whose people were a mixture of Mediterranean, Semitic, and African populations each bringing unique cultural traditions to the table). Postulating a direct biological descent from this Classical fantasy to the present helped justify contemporary racist practices. White plantation owners in the American South, for example, built their plantations according to Neo-Classical architecture (as did the architects of our nation's capitol), so that the slave master's mansion would recall the Parthenon of Ancient Greece, suggesting a racial continuity between the Classical forefathers and the slave owners. In the construction of whiteness, it was regularly said that slavery and democracy were not a contradiction, since the ancient Greeks had themselves been slave owners and regularly persecuted races considered "barbarians." What was good enough for the original whites, it was thought, was good enough for the people of Virginia and South Carolina and Mississippi (an argument that was not widely contested by white Americans in the North).

Whiteness, then, emerged as what we now call a "pan-ethnic" category, as a way of merging a variety of European ethnic populations into a single "race," especially so as to distinguish them from people with whom they had very particular legal and political relations—Africans, Asians, American Indians—that were not equal to their

#### VISUAL CONNECTIONS: WHAT IS RACE?

As Jay indicates in paragraph 6, scholars have argued for many years about how to define race. Many have tried to find a scientific basis for the apparent differences in skin color and facial features that we associate with race. Consider this image from a project called *Human Race Machine* by artist Nancy Burson, which shows the same face in several different racial categories. What does this image communicate about race?



*The Human Race Machine*, Nancy Burson, 2000

relations with one another as whites. But what of America as the great “melting pot”? When we read our history, we come to see that the “melting pot” never included certain darker ingredients, and never produced a substance that was anything but white. Take, for example, that first and most famous essay on the question “What is an American?” In 1781, an immigrant Frenchman turned New York farmer named Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur published his book *Letters from an American Farmer*. Here are some lines from its most quoted pages:

. . . whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen. What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The Americans were once scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of populations which has ever appeared.

- 10 No longer a European, the American represents a new race made from the stock of various European nations. No mention is made of Africans or Indians, perhaps because this new American race does indeed receive new prejudices from the new mode of life it has embraced. Crèvecoeur candidly describes the process by which the American race originated as a white race; or rather, the way in which the descendants of Europeans constructed a myth of themselves as a white race with special claim on the answer to the question “What is an American?” An American was a white man. Just as importantly, America was that place where the downtrodden classes of Europe could throw off the oppression of aristocrats and attain not only fraternal equality among themselves, but superiority over those who were not of the new white race. When the Constitution of the United States was written, it thus specifically enshrined slavery into law and denied citizenship to enslaved Africans. When the Naturalization Act of 1789 was made law, it stipulated that only “whites” were eligible for naturalization as citizens (a clause persistently contested by people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry for the next 150 years).

In a fascinating, provocative book called *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev describes this process of Europeans becoming white in the case of the Irish immigrants of the nineteenth century. Ireland was a colony devastated by English imperialism, and by a racial stereotyping of the Irish as backward, primitive, savage, and barbarian (in no small measure because of their Catholicism). When the Irish set foot in America, they were still subject to much of the racial prejudice and discrimination they had suffered at home at the hands of the British. Irish immigrants to America occupied a position only just above that of the blacks, alongside whom they often labored on the docks or railroads. For the Irish, becoming white would offer many advantages, not least of which would be the elimination of their major com-

petitors for jobs. The Irish began to organize the exclusion of Northern free blacks from shipyard or factory employment, and continued this discrimination in later generations when the Irish dominated the police and firemen's unions in most cities. The Irish formed a key ingredient in the pro-slavery coalition that sat at the core of the Democratic Party in America before the Civil War, and which was brought to full power by the Indian killer and Southern patriot Andrew Jackson. White working class men, many of them Irish, opposed the abolition of slavery because of the threat they believed free blacks would pose to their economic prosperity, just as they opposed the extension of slavery into the new territories because of the threat slavery would pose to the creation of high wage jobs in the West. The hostility between the Irish and the blacks that lives on until today has its roots in this early history of how the Irish became white, and of how various Irish-dominated institutions in urban America—especially police and fire departments and labor unions—prospered through racial discrimination.

Whiteness, of course, is a delusion—as the insane Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick* demonstrates. Scientists today agree that there is no such thing as “race,” at least when analyzed in terms of genetics or behavioral variation. Every human population is a mongrel population, full of people descended from various places and with widely differing physical qualities. Racial purity is the most absurd delusion, since intermarriage and miscegenation have been far more the norm than the exception throughout human ethnic history. “Race,” then, is what academics like to call a “socially constructed” reality. Race is a reality in the sense that people experience it as real and base much of their behavior on it. Race, however, is only real because certain social institutions and practices make it real. Race is real in the same way that a building or a religion or a political ideology is real, as each is the result of human effort, not a prescription from nature or God. Thus the concept of race can have little or no foundation, yet it can still be the force that makes or breaks someone's life, or the life of a people or a nation.

For white people, race functions as a large ensemble of practices and rules that give white people all sorts of small and large advantages in life. Whiteness is the source of many privileges, which is one reason people have trouble giving it up. It is important to stress that to criticize whiteness is not necessarily to engage in a massive orchestration of guilt. Guilt is often a distracting and mistaken emotion, especially when it comes to race. White people are fond of pointing out that as individuals they have never practiced discrimination, or that their ancestors never owned slaves. White people tend to cast the question of race in terms of guilt in part because of the American ideology of individualism, by which I mean our tendency to want to believe that individuals determine their own destinies and responsibilities. In this sense it is un-American to insist that white

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#### CONVERSATIONS: THE IRISH IN AMERICA

In paragraph 11, Jay discusses the history of the Irish people and how they have been viewed both in Europe and in the United States. The status of the Irish has long been a matter of cultural and political controversy and conflict, complicated by longstanding religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants. These controversies continue to be the focus of attention today. The film *Gangs of New York* (2002) portrays some of the history of the Irish in New York. It's worth considering what a film like this one might suggest about the struggles of a people to define itself and to resist being defined in certain ways. It's also worth thinking about how popular films like this one contribute to ongoing discussions about specific racial or ethnic groups. In this essay, Jay is arguing in part that how we discuss race makes a difference. Since popular films are a medium by which these discussions take place, we might consider how they influence such discussions.

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#### STRATEGIES: USING EXAMPLES TO ILLUSTRATE A POINT

In paragraphs 12 and 13, Jay is discussing complex theoretical ideas related to what he calls the “social construction” of reality. (If you're interested in exploring these ideas further, you can consult the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Berger, two important theorists who have written about social construction theory.) Here, Jay provides several general but concrete examples of how his own racial “whiteness” might affect his daily life. Consider how effectively these brief examples help you understand his larger abstract point about the privileges of the racial category of whiteness.

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**CONVERSATIONS: THE ABOLITION OF WHITENESS**

Jay's reference in this paragraph to the work of David Roediger is one example of how scholars and critics use each other's work to continue discussions of issues like race. Roediger is a well-known historian and author of *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (1994). Jay's reference to Roediger's work helps him make his point in this paragraph. What else might this reference accomplish?

Americans benefit every day from their whiteness, whether or not they intend to do so. But that is the reality. Guilt, then, has nothing to do with whiteness in this sense of benefiting from structural racism and built-in privileges. I may not intend anything racial when I apply for a loan, or walk into a store, or hail a cab, or ask for a job—but in every circumstance my whiteness will play a role in the outcome, however “liberal” or “anti-racist” I imagine myself to be.

White men have enormous economic advantages because of the disadvantages faced by women and minorities, no matter what any individual white men may intend. If discrimination means that fewer qualified applicants compete with you for the job, you benefit. You do not have to be a racist to benefit from being white. You just have to look the part.

The privileges of whiteness are the not-so-secret dirty truth about race relations in America. Three decades after Dr. King, we should be able to see that our blindness to whiteness has crippled us in our walk toward equality and justice and freedom. As the national conversation on race continues, let us resolve to make whiteness an issue, and not just on this holiday or during Black History Month. When we talk about race in America, we should be talking about the invention of whiteness, and about what David Roediger calls the “abolition of whiteness.” From this perspective, the end of racism will not come when America grants equal rights to minorities. Racism will end only with the abolition of whiteness, when the white whale that has been the source of so many delusions is finally left to disappear beneath the sea of time forever.