

## WHITENESS

Americans have been talking a good deal these days about "white privilege" and "white supremacy." Thirty years ago I wrote an essay called "Multiculturalism and the Media." It was delivered as a speech at the Commonwealth Club of California in 1990 and later published first in Ishmael Reed's marvelous anthology, *MultiAmerica* (Viking, 1997) and then in my book, *O Powerful Western Star* (2000). The speech was also quoted from and discussed in Walt Harrington's 1992 book, *Crossings: A White Man's Journey Into Black America*. I want to quote from it here.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first appearance in print of the word "white" meaning "A white man; a person of a race distinguished by a light complexion," was in 1671. The second was in 1726. The speaker is a ship's captain:

There may be about 20000 Whites (or I should say Portuguese, for they are none of the whitest,) and about treble that number of Slaves.

The term "Caucasian" is even later:

Of or belonging to the region of the Caucasus; a name given by Blumenbach (*a* 1800) to the 'white' race of mankind, which he derived from this region.

"Through the centuries of the slave trade," writes Earl Conrad in his interesting book, *The Invention of the Negro*,

the word race was rarely if ever used...Shakespeare's Shylock uses the words tribe, nation, but not race. The Moor in *Othello* calls himself black and the word slave is several times used, but not race. The word does not appear in the King James Version of the Bible in any context other than as running a race. The Bible refers to nations and says: "God made the world and all things therein; and hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." The Bible, with all its violence and its incessant warfare between peoples, does not have racist references to tribes, groups, provinces, nations, men.

And again, on the subject of slavery:

The traffic grew with the profits--the shuttle service importing human chattel to America in over-crowded ships.

It was on these ships that we find the beginnings--the first crystallizations--of the curious doctrine which was to be called "white supremacy"...Among the first white men to develop attitudes of supremacy were the slaveship crews.

Hand in hand with what Mr. Conrad calls "the invention of the Negro" goes the invention of "the white man."

My young son came home from school one day and told me that he had seen some t shirts which had the equivalent of the phrase, "Black is Beautiful" on them. (I believe the phrase was in fact "Black by Popular Demand.") He complained that he couldn't wear a shirt saying, "White is Beautiful" or "White by Popular Demand." I said, "That's true. But you *could* wear a shirt saying 'Italian is Beautiful' or 'Irish is Beautiful' or 'Spanish is Beautiful.'" The point is that *white is not an ethnic group*: it has no traditions, no culture.

But if it is not an ethnic group, what is it?

I think the answer is that white is an indication of dominance. It is always involved at some level with what Kipling called "the white man's burden." "White" in this sense is an indication of power, or of the struggle for power, or of power's lack. In the entry from the O.E.D. which I quoted a moment ago, the rhetorical opposite of "Whites" is not "Blacks" but "Slaves":

There may be about 20000 Whites (or I should say Portuguese, for they are none of the whitest,) and about treble that Number of Slaves.

To be "white" is to engage in dominance behavior. Insofar as one does not engage in dominance behavior one is not white. But one remains Italian or Irish or German or Swedish or Jewish or whatever. *The only way for the "majority" to conceive of itself as a majority is to conceive of itself as white: without whiteness there are only "minorities."*

To speak of multiculturalism, therefore, is to speak of a way of seeing the world without whiteness--though one has to admit that whiteness (power, dominance) is much in evidence. We create it daily in our interplay with others. We create it as well by refusing to recognize the ethnicity--the genetic make-up--that we all carry with us into the world.

It was Ishmael Reed's brilliant perception that the disintegration of the notion of "the white man" brought forth the liberation of the ethnicities of which we are all a part. His organizations, The Before Columbus Foundation and PEN Oakland, are made up of various ethnic persuasions, *none of which identify as white*. That these ethnicities include the Irish, the Italians, and others that people conventionally think of as white is all the more important to stress. A long time ago, a friend of mine and I wrote a song called "There's No Man Like a White Man." I don't remember much of the song, but the ending was,

I once built a snow man  
And put him in the hall  
With a white man  
                  there's no man  
                                  at all.

Multiculturalism implies a continual effort of construction and deconstruction. It allows us to test our concepts by bringing them home, taking them inside, and seeing whether we end up with something more solid than a puddle of water. What does it mean to be

Italian American? What does it mean to be Irish American? Did Columbus discover America or did he invade it? What does it mean to be white?

I once built a snow man  
And put him in the hall  
With a white man  
there's no man  
at all.

How do we get rid of this bump on the log, this pothole in the road, the white man? We can begin by noting that it never really existed.