

Why Does “Blackness” Matter?: The Socio-historical Context of Racism in America

Winter 2021

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Class Location: Zoom

Meeting Time: Thursdays, 6:30-8 p.m.

Please complete the reading prior to each session, which will usually take you about 1.5 hours to do (not including optional reading). Please also bring with you two things that struck you as important for us to consider, as this will support robust discussions. During our 1.5 hours together, I will usually lecture for 30-40 minutes. Then we will do combinations of personal reflection, small group break-out sessions, class-wide discussion, and short podcast and video listening/viewing. I look forward to learning and growing with you!

WEEK 1, January 28th—“Race,” Inventing “the Other,” and Capitalism: we cover the historical origins of “race” and racism and theories related to how and why they evolve, rather than end, despite resistance. We also mark how White capitalist elites’ desire for labor and social control drive racialization processes.

Readings:

1. Roberts, Dorothy. 2011. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty First Century*. New York, New York: The New Press—read the following: “Chapter 1: The Invention of Race.”
2. Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 2015. *Racial Formation in the United States (Third Edition)*. New York, New York: Routledge—read the following: “Chapter 4: The Theory of Racial Formation.”

Optional

3. Kendi, Ibram. 2016. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, New York, New York: Bold Type Books—read the following: “Chapter 1: Human Hierarchy.”
4. Kendi, Ibram. 2016. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, New York, New York: Bold Type Books—read the following: “Chapter 2: Origins of Racist Ideas.”
5. Kendi, Ibram. 2016. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, New York, New York: Bold Type Books—read the following: “Chapter 3: Coming to America.”

Questions to Guide Reading:

1. What does it mean that “race” is socially constructed?
2. What social circumstances surrounded the invention of “race” and a “White”-dominant racial hierarchy?
3. What/who were the primary institutions and actors shaping the racial and economic landscape in the U.S. colonial period? What are institutions’ and actors’ relative power positions?

Personal Reflection (you will be given time to do this during the class session, but it may be valuable to think about this ahead of time): What is your “race”? How do you know? Can you recall when you first became aware of your race? If so, how did you feel then? How do you feel about your race now? What motivates you to feel this way? Does your racial identity map to how others see you? If not, what are the consequences, if any, of this discrepancy?

WEEK 2, February 4th—Race, Power, and Policy: we discuss interconnections between racial and ethnic boundaries in the United States, paying particular attention to the role that government policies and courts have played in shaping these social distinctions, and the material and social resources at stake as ethno-racial boundaries are established and contested. We also consider how capitalist interests, policies, and informal practices, especially violence, facilitate White people's disproportionate wealth accumulation and their control of dominant institutions, and thus their ability to have significant influence on all racial and ethnic groups' life chances.

Readings:

1. Desmond, Matthew. 2019. "In Order to Understand the Brutality of American Capitalism, You Have to Start on the Plantation." "The 1619 Project." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>.
2. Oliver, Melvin and Thomas Shapiro. 2006. *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York, New York: Routledge—read the following: "Chapter 2: A Sociology of Wealth and Racial Inequality."

Optional

3. Fox, Cybelle. 2012. *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the Present*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press—read the following: "Chapter 2: Three Worlds of Race, Labor, and Politics."
4. Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2014. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

Questions to Guide Reading:

1. Through what mechanisms are race/racism and capitalism connected?
2. What are the key policies and court cases shaping racial disparities in social outcomes?
3. Why is wealth a better measure than income for the cumulative effects of racism?

Mid-Course Assignment: To what extent has your family (parents/grandparents/great-grand parents) benefitted from major federal legislation underpinning the economic stability/wealth of the middle class (I expect this will require a phone call or two with family members)? Be sure to consider *at least* the following policies: The Homestead Acts of the 1800s, the Social Security Act of 1935, The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill), and Federal Housing Administration-backed mortgages? Does what you learned surprise you? Why or why not? **ADVANCED MOVE:** create a family tree with this information, going back as far as you can (feel free to check archives!).

WEEK 3, February 11th—Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration: we cover how immigration has shaped racial and ethnic hierarchies during two major waves of immigration in the 20th century—the first two decades of the 1900s and the period after 1965 immigration reform. In the contemporary context, we focus on the extent to which and how increasing numbers of Latinx, Asian, African, and Caribbean immigrants have changed the terms of White domination and the "Black-White" binary of racial dynamics.

Readings:

1. Treitler, Vilna Bashi. 2013. *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Faction*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press—read the following: "Chapter 1: Racism and Ethnic Myths."
2. Kim, Claire. 1999. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics and Society* 27(1):105-138.

Optional

3. Treitler, Vilna Bashi. 2013. *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Faction*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press—read the following: "Chapter 4: The Irish, Chinese, Italians, and Jews: Successful Ethnic Projects."

4. Treitler, Vilna Bashi. 2013. *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Faction*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press—read the following: “Chapter 5: The Native Americans, Mexicans, and Afro-Caribbeans: Struggling Ethnic Projects.”

Questions to Guide Reading:

1. In what ways do Black, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous Americans have similar experiences with racism? In what ways do their experiences differ? What policies and court cases underpin variation?
2. How does immigration, the entry of new residents into the United States, potentially threaten White domination? How do White elites manage this precarity?
3. How do most immigrant groups respond to anti-Black racism? Why this/these strategies?

WEEK 4, February 18th—Racism, Its Social Implications, and Steps Toward Justice: we consider how racism shapes inequities in a host of domains, such as health and criminal justice. We also discuss proposals for enacting meaningful, positive social change.

Readings:

1. Phelan, Joe C. and Bruce G. Link. 2013. “Is Racism a Fundamental Cause of Inequalities in Health?” *Annual Review of Sociology* 41:311-330.
2. Arablouei, Ramtin and Rund Abdelatah. 2020. “NPR's History Podcast ‘Throughline’ Explores Policing in America.” National Public Radio (NPR): Morning Edition.
Link: <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/05/870227945/nprs-history-podcast-throughline-explores-policing-in-america> OR North, Anna. 2020. “How Racist Policing Took Over American Cities, Explained by a Historian,” *Vox* [Interview of Harvard historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad]
<https://www.vox.com/2020/6/6/21280643/police-brutality-violence-protests-racism-khalil-muhammad>.
3. Kendi, Ibram. 2019. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. New York, New York: One World—read the following: “Chapter 1: Definitions,” “Chapter 2: Dueling Consciousness,” “Chapter 17: Success,” and “Chapter 18: Survival.”

Questions to Guide Reading:

1. What does it mean that racism is a “fundamental cause” of health inequities? Why is framing it this way important for thinking about how to resist racism and envision more inclusive social systems?
2. What social actions and institutions do you think are best suited for upending racism and establishing more just social relationships? What actions and institutions are least suited? What makes you say this?