

A History of Racism in the United States

1492-1954

Psalms 78:1-8

Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

² I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old:

³ Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

⁴ We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.

⁵ For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children:

⁶ That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children:

⁷ That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments:

⁸ And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God.

Today's Challenge

The history of racism – “dark sayings of old”, casts a long shadow on our nation's history (the world's history). We must bring all narratives of the groups that have shaped that history into the light, and grapple with the reality that speaking and hearing truth is a more complex and difficult task than merely accepting one narrative. This is key to understanding racism, and this series is one way to begin those tough conversations.

Opening Prayer

Our Words, and Understanding of those Words, Matter

- History is biased. It is often written by the winners...
 - How have the words or biased concepts we have been taught “white-washed” our thinking?
 - Are some of the things you have started to learn shocking or new to you?
 - Do you recognize some of your own biases?
- What are some of the terms that you have continued to ponder since the last two sessions?
- Have you noticed a difference in how you have viewed some of your past held beliefs around the words Racism and Racist?
- Words of focus for this session:
 - White Supremacy
 - Colonialism

- Also words we need to claim around the first 298 years of our country:
 - Genocide (an estimated 75M peoples lived in this country when it was first “discovered”)
 - Slavery
 - Land Theft
 - Forced Migration
 - Conquest
 - Systemic Destruction of Culture
 - Dehumanization



<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/topics/reference/colonialism/>

PHOTOGRAPH OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, CORBIS/VCG VIA GETTY VIA NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Colonialism

- the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically
- a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another
- Majorly there are two types of colonialism: Settler and Exploitation. The Settler colonialism involves immigration at large scale as an outcome of religious, economic or political issues. Exploitation colonialism involves the trade and commerce like the export of goods or even the slave trade.



White Supremacy

- Not a group – but the belief, theory, or doctrine that white people are inherently superior to people from all other racial and ethnic groups, especially Black people, and are therefore rightfully the dominant group in any society
- an embedded belief in the superiority of Northern European white people
- the belief that white people are superior to those of other races and thus should dominate them
- the belief that white people constitute a superior race and should therefore dominate society, typically to the exclusion or detriment of other racial and ethnic groups, in particular black or Jewish people
- the belief that white people are better than other races and should be in power

The concept of white as a race is a human construct with its origins predominantly to the United States. Prior to colonialism, peoples were differentiated by their geographic/ethnic backgrounds, not the color of their skin. The term “white” as a differentiator appears in early colonial documents and legislation and was meant to draw distinction between Northern Europeans and all others.

“Discovery” vs. “Conquest”
1492 - 1954



<https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/the-royal-african-company-supplying-slaves-to-jamestown.htm>

- 1492 voyage was part of empire building by European monarchs (specifically Spain) meant to conquer new lands and exploit resources. Natives were dehumanized for being of non-European origin to justify the conquest, and the decimation of these indigenous peoples and their cultures.
- 1607 first trading outpost was established by the English in an already inhabited country. The European settlers sought to convert “heathen tribes” and to possess land that did not belong to them. Again, natives were portrayed as less than human to justify land theft and systemic destruction.
- 1619 the first enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown, marking the historical focal point in American history of the ultimate of dehumanizing practices: the of reduction of people into property, a horrific practice which had been used for centuries throughout the world. (Note that while this date is recognized as slavery’s root in America, free and enslaved Africans were in American long before that date. Source: <https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619>)
- 1691 Virginia legislation provided for the banishment of any interracial marriage between a white man or woman to a negro, mulatto or Indian man or woman bond or free.



- 1706 the colonial government declared that baptism could not entitle a slave to freedom. The was not exempt from participating in the formation of systemic racism.
- 1787 the three-fifths compromise was agreed to between the northern and southern states in the US Constitution deeming slaves as only three-fifths of a person for taxation and representation purposes (taxation legislation in which African slaves were deemed as “property” to be paid taxes on, not “people” who paid taxes)
- 1788 John Newton, a slave ship captain who came to renounce the salve trade and wrote “Amazing Grace.”
- 1790 the first Naturalization Act, legislation on citizenship, states only “free white persons” could be naturalized citizens. Exempted were enslaved Africans, Native Americans, European indentured servants, and later freed slaves and Asians.



- 1808 US Congress did outlaw slave trade import, “prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States...from any foreign kingdom, place, or country”, but domestic slave trade continued to flourish. Note, up until 1680, the European indentured servants were the primary import. After 1680 there was a decline in this human “resource” and an explosion of import of African slaves (source: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/congress-abolishes-the-african-slave-trade>).
- 1829 Andrew Jackson was elected President. In his first message to Congress he outlined the plan to relocate and “generously” “give” an ample district west of the Mississippi to Indian tribes. This decision by Jackson and Congress was made without the input or consent of the people being relocated. Once the natural resources of fertile farmlands and gold were discovered, the “ample district” dwindled considerably in size.
- 1830 Mexico makes slavery illegal and prohibits further American migrants from entering their country.
- 1836 confrontations lead to a twelve-year Mexican-American war.
- 1848 the US defeats Mexico and Mexico cedes half of Mexico to the US. Manifest destiny, the concept that Europeans and their descendants were ordained by destiny to rule all of America, propagated the belief that the inferior must give way before the superior race. The mongrel Spanish-Indian Mexican and their descendants were deemed unfit for the land.
- 1838 five tribes east of the Mississippi were rounded up, placed into camps and then forced into migration via the trail of tears. By 1844 only 30,000 Indians lived east of the Mississippi, down from more than 120,000 in 1820. Included in the forced migration were the Cherokee. 25% of the Cherokee involved died.
- 1870 the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, amended the legislation on citizenship to include “persons of African nativity or African descent”. This change, unfortunately, still left out other peoples of color.
- 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling established Jim Crow laws of “separate but equal” places of transportation, education and other social institutions. Separate did not equate to equal, and resources were allocated disproportionately to the detriment of non-white populations. This was sadly not recognized until 1954.



- 1900 the Foraker Act made Puerto Rican citizens into American citizens with minimal representation and no voting rights in presidential elections, even their Commissioner to the US House of Representatives was non-voting. This legislation allowed US companies to move into Puerto Rico to set up operations and receive tax incentives to do so, but Puerto Rican companies were not allowed to grow and expand to operate in the US. Pharmaceutical companies were allowed to operate and facilitate testing on the Puerto Rican people, including involuntary sterilization of Puerto Rican Women
- 1920 Harlem was becoming the race capital, shaping a cultural movement, as Black migration out of the south brought together many artists; writers, musicians, painters, poets.
- 1942 President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order (9066) authorizing the removal of all Americans of Japanese descent from the western states and relocated to inland concentration camps due to Anti-Japanese hysteria following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.
- 1954 The Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Kansas* struck down *Plessy v. Ferguson* establishing that separate was indeed not equal, ending the legalized era of segregation by race (color).

It is important to remember that slavery was not exclusive to African peoples, however a large part of the economic backbone of the early United States was built upon this large group of enslaved people – 4 million African slaves were freed at the end of the civil war – many more had long since lived and died prior to that. However, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, indentured white European servants, and poor white Europeans of non-favored ethnic backgrounds were also enslaved, exploited and subjugated during this same time.

Additional Resources

- “The Color of Law” A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America by Richard Rothstein
- The Trail of Tears: The 19th Century Forced Migration of Native Americans by History Titans
- Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
- They Call Us Enemy by George Takei
- The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America by Andres Resendez
- GHOSTS OF GOLD MOUNTAIN The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad By Gordon H. Chang
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/03/last-slave-ship-survivor-descendants-identified/>