

Thinking white

Will Harris

I was asked to write about whether (at all) I conjure 'thinking black' in my writing, and if it presents any issues; and also, to reflect on the inverse, the challenge of 'thinking white'. But that inverse feels like it should be the starting point, because in fact it's no challenge at all to 'think white'. The voice of whiteness is all-pervasive, internalised to the extent that I don't know if it's possible *not* to 'think white'.

Here's an example of white thinking. I was running a writing workshop for the East and Southeast Asian community; not everyone there was from that community, which was great. It was a free workshop, open to the public. We played games and talked about animals, testing our voices and misspelling words, making self-portraits, discussing food, housing, exile.

One of the (white) people in attendance was high up in the (East Asian) organisation hosting us. As one of the poets talked about her upbringing in Malaysia, being raised on a coconut plantation, the violence of the British forces, the ethnic cleansing of the Chinese and Indian populations, this white person decided to intervene. She asked if the poet had meant to say 'Caucasian' rather than 'English' in her poem. The poet was confused. The white person turned the conversation towards herself; she said that she felt aware of the need to acknowledge her 'Caucasian privilege'.

When I say 'white thinking', I mean this: a kind of *racialised* thinking that is self-deceptive, cloaking its presence. It brings the 'I' of whiteness to the forefront of conversation, but anxiously. Perhaps there's some embarrassment about promoting the 'I' so nakedly – about saying 'look at me!' – which can result in defensiveness (an apology, an acknowledgment of privilege) or aggressiveness ('why should I apologise?'). Racialised thinking is fuelled by a sense of threat. It wants things to be clear and separate, when the reality is that voices and bodies are always converging, commingling, overlapping.

Putting aside this person's brazen instinct towards self-centring, I was also chilled by her use of the word 'Caucasian'.

In the 18th century, Johann Blumenbach, a student of the Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus, became one of the first scientists of 'race'. He was an advocate of monogenism, which held that *Homo sapiens* (to use Linnaeus's new term) originated in the Caucasus region and that the other races 'degenerated' from this ideal form due to environmental factors like diet and climate. Blumenbach divided humans into five distinct 'racial' groupings. He didn't believe any one was inferior to another, but he did think all would revert to the 'Caucasian' norm in the appropriate conditions. He was also the founder of craniometry, a pseudoscience predicated on the belief that skull measurements can be used to assess intelligence or personality traits.

As late as 1962, the white supremacist Carleton S. Coon was referring to five different races which he called 'subspecies': Caucasoid, Congoid, Capoid, Mongoloid and Australoid. He argued that because 'Caucasoid' Europeans developed 200,000 years before 'Congoid' Africans they were, technically speaking, more evolved. This was well received by segregationists like Carleton Putnam (a lot of racists were called Carleton for some reason), who didn't need much convincing as to the superiority of the 'white race'.

I'm not suggesting that this white woman in an arts organisation was purposely invoking the spectre of segregationist race thinking by her use of 'Caucasian'. But

intentionally or otherwise, she expressed the same desire behind so many pseudoscientific theories: a need for clear lines, for well-defined characteristics; a way to separate humans, and, in doing so, to keep them apart.

The conversation moved on. Someone had written a poem about beef tomato rice and we talked about that. But that tiny interaction stayed. It brought me back to the research I'd done for a book-length essay called *Mixed-Race Superman*, which came out a few years before. It had involved reading into the sometimes funny, often disturbing history of race science – something you might call an exercise in 'white thinking'. I hadn't been able to include much of this research in the end, but it was instructive.

It made me think how strange it is that we sweep bad science under the carpet. Why not teach those debunked theories alongside the ones still supported by the available evidence? Both emerge from the same milieu of research and debate; both are tinged by the ideologies of their time. Had it been taught like this at school, science would have made sense not just as a set of developing theories and formulas but as a story that is constantly being revised and edited.

It might have also helped counter the bad science still floating around the playground, absorbed into casual insults. At school, I was sometimes called a 'mong'. I didn't know

about Dr John Langdon Down, a superintendent at a mental hospital in Surrey who, in 1866, had used a version of this term in a paper arguing that disease in parents could result in degeneracy in their children. According to prevailing scientific wisdom, a foetus in the womb would 'recapitulate' the entire evolutionary cycle – from shellfish to fish, salamander to turtle, chicken to rabbit – before taking on its final human form. The last developmental stage involved working through the various human 'types' – Malay, Negro, American, Mongolian, Caucasian – until, in the words of geologist and evolutionary thinker Robert Chambers, attaining the 'highest or Caucasian type.' What was a Mongolian? In Chambers' words, 'an arrested infant newly-born.' Reading this, Dr Down concluded that 'a very large number of congenital idiots are typical Mongols. So marked is this, that when placed side by side, it is difficult to believe that the specimens are not children of the same parents.' For around a century, what is now known as Down syndrome (or trisomy 21) was referred to as Mongolism.

Even if I wasn't being called a 'mong', the same assumptions were at work: East Asians looked alike, had less intelligent features and aspired to the Caucasian ideal. It's worth noting how the treatment of those marginalised by race and class has often been continuous with the awful treatment of people with learning disabilities – intellect is undermined, and you are either pitied or shunned so long as you are kept at a distance.

Mixed-Race Superman was not an argument in favour of a mixed-race superman to come. The opposite; it was about how those with multiple heritages are forced to deconstruct the mangled logic behind racialised thinking – the weird assumptions, generalisations and stereotypes which ultimately serve those in power. A mixed experience of the world runs against the belief in racial purity and superior specimens. It involves asking a question that still troubles me: if we dispense with generalisations and fixed categories, how do we define ourselves? In other words, how do we define ourselves *to ourselves*?

Going over my notes, I found a quotation I'd typed out from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. It's something Mrs Ramsay thinks after putting her children to bed, when she at last has a moment to herself: 'To be silent; to be alone [... One] shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others [...] This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting.'

Our shared responsibility has to extend beyond a bland respect for difference; it has to take in what we cannot see, which is secret and exultant. Which means seeing beyond

'black' and 'white', of course; but it also means keeping alive that invisible 'wedge-shaped core of darkness' within all of us.

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A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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