

Race: What whiteness isn't

SUNDAYINDEPENDENT /

15 March 2015 at 06:59am

By: Gillian Schutte

Science shows there are no races, only humanity, while history shows that 500 years ago explorers created the myth of white supremacy that allowed the exploitation of others, writes Gillian Schutte.

Johannesburg - Many white folk get very upset when reading anti-racism writing that refers to the term "whiteness". They take it personally and think it is a direct attack on their white skin. But whiteness does not refer to skin colour or white people so much as it refers to a system of discrimination based on an artificial ideology of race power and privilege. It is the system itself, rather than the white individual, that is critiqued by anti-racism activists.

To refer to whiteness cannot be an attack on the white race because, according to contemporary scientific evidence, the white race does not exist. Nor do any of the other races categorised in relation to this mythical white race.

There is only humanity.

Humanity embraces all people of all phenotypes and it has been demonstrated scientifically that diversity in physicality has nothing to do with biological difference in race, but is largely to do with environmental factors. The online dictionary describes a phenotype as an individual's observable traits, such as height, eye colour, skin tone and blood type.

Kenan Malik, in his book *Strange Fruit* (2008), says that "while the genetics of population differences are a biological reality, the interpretation of these differences is deeply shaped by politics".

Race, then, is a social myth that was constructed about 500 years ago and was intricately bound up in the politics of the time.

But why, in a modern world, do so many continue to hold on to the concept of different races when it has been deemed as mythological as the creationist fable of Adam and Eve? And why do modern human beings continue to practise racism although it has been scientifically proved that race does not exist?

Robert Wald Sussman explores this topic in his book *The Myth of Race* (2014). He writes that “even though biological races do not exist, the concept of race obviously is still a reality, as is racism. These are prevalent and persistent elements of our everyday lives and generally accepted aspects of our culture.” He argues that race is definitely a part of our culture as race and racism are deeply ingrained in our history.

Race, it turns out, is nothing more than a socially constructed classification that attaches powerful meaning to perceptions of skin colour. It is a 500-year-old construct designed to privilege white people over others. European male expansionists, explorers and colonialists were the people who constructed this system of racial hierarchy and placed those of European origin and white skin at the top of the ladder – declaring themselves the “human race” and all others a sub-species. And so race was born, upon which a manufactured discourse of white superiority was built that gave rise to exploitation based upon difference.

Whiteness writer Richard Dyer explains in his book *White* that Europeans constructed whiteness through the framework of Christianity, racial discourse, and imperialism as an essence “that is in but not of the body”. Thus colonisation was constructed as God’s work and the ideology of whiteness framed as metaphysical and godly.

Christianity, the dominant ideology in Europe, merged the model of bodily transcendence with the supremacy of whiteness itself. It elevated whiteness to the status of God over other categories of race. This was the basis of the European discourse on race during the 18th and 19th centuries.

White people were consequently constructed as the moral race, contrary to amoral and body-bound, spiritless non-whites, who were considered “no more than their bodies”. Those not white were deemed by whites to be base, animalistic and often endowed with demonic sexuality. They became the victims of the collective white projection of Victorian morality and repressed sexuality that resulted in the proliferation of many complex, unstable, and dangerous sexual desires and abuses of the black body. Pervasive white negativity towards the black body was manufactured in this whiteness discourse and this remains persistent in contemporary society, as witnessed in the continuing phenomenon of racism.

Empathy for the black body has intentionally been bred out of whiteness as this serves to maintain the status quo. Rather, whites are taught that the black body must be feared, disciplined, reviled and kept at a safe distance from “pristine” whiteness. This is what underpinned the white acceptance of apartheid in South Africa.

Frantz Fanon, in his groundbreaking book *Black Faces, White Masks* (1952) explains the pervasiveness of the “derogatory negro” myth. “European civilisation is characterised by the presence, at the heart of what Jung calls the collective unconscious, of an archetype: an expression of the bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the uncivilised savage, the Negro who slumbers in every white man.”

He argues that this becomes “negrophobia” – an embedded fear in the European collective imaginary that plays out in a way that “defies all rational thinking” and endows the object with “evil intentions and... the attributes of a malefic power”.

Fanon was of the view that whites do not project on to the black man the sexuality that they themselves would like to have, but rather project on to others the faults they fear in themselves and thereby purge themselves of those evils.

In Fanon’s words: “In the remotest depth of the European unconscious an inordinately black hollow has been made in which the most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires lie dormant. And as every man climbs up toward whiteness and light, the European has tried to repudiate this uncivilised self, which has attempted to defend itself. When European civilisation came into contact with the black world, with those savage peoples, everyone agreed: Those Negroes were the principle of evil.”

It was this constructed anti-black belief system that gave white people the supposed God-given right to enslave, brutalise and oppress whole nations of people whom they did not see as equally human. They saw them instead as inferior and animalistic – they needed to be tamed and “set to work” as punishment for not being as godly and puritan as white folk. This, their ideology asserted, was the natural order of things.

When deconstructed, whiteness is not white people in themselves, but about an expedient supremacist and exploitative ideology that served the white aristocratic elite and allowed for economic expansion that relied on a slave system and later a

cheap labour force. In all the global colonial exploits, indigenous people were brutalised, oppressed and turned into chattels to this end. Working class white people were manipulated to buy into this ideology to bolster and ensure the longevity of the elitists who relied on this obedience to enrich and entrench themselves.

White working class folk were pitted against blacks and given marginal socio-economic ascendancy over them as a way to maintain this cleavage. In this way the working class was fragmented and posed less of a threat to the super rich.

It was this history that entrenched white economic supremacy and gave rise to Western domination of the world economy through the system of capitalism. In fact capitalism was largely built upon the blood, sweat and tears, and often knowledge, of people with melanin for the benefit of those who lack melanin.

Whiteness remains an occupying hierarchical economic system that mostly elevates those with white skin over those with colour. It has become an entrenched organism that continuously shifts to find new ways to hold on to a set of normative privileges granted to white-skinned individuals and groups while maintaining the super-power of those few at the top of the economic ladder.

Whiteness as an ideology is normalised in its production and maintained through capitalism and its machinery, including mainstream media, the judicial system, the education system, religion and popular culture. This all culminates in the dominant discourse that upholds a system of whiteness and ensures its authority. It is through these functions that white privilege becomes “invisible” to those who benefit from it and blatantly palpable to those who are oppressed and consistently disadvantaged by it.

In an anti-racism framework it is seldom that a white individual or group is being attacked. Rather it is the “system of whiteness” that is deconstructed to reveal the historically skewed power relations that continue to reinvent new strands of insidious dominance in contemporary times. It is this system that needs to be dismantled to make place for a radical reimagining of humanness and oneness, so that all people are able to access their full potential and live with the dignity that is their human birthright.

* Schutte is an anti-racism educator, activist, social justice feminist and filmmaker. She is co-founder of Media for Justice, author of the novel *After Just Now* and a published poet.