

bell hooks on Representations of Whiteness and of White People in the Black Imagination

How did conceptions of whiteness and white people arise?

- Plenty of academic writing focuses on how white people perceive blackness, but far less has been published about how black people perceive whiteness.
- Black people have a knowledge of whiteness built for the purpose of survival in a white supremacist society.
- Black people experience whiteness with fear and suspicion, reflecting the ways in which whiteness acts as a power that terrifies, wounds, and hurts.

The Role of Slavery & the Terror of Whiteness

- Through slavery, white people objectified black bodies in that they did not allow them, as objects, to fully perceive the world around them, **though black people perceived nonetheless**. White people allocated serious punishments for black people caught observing the white people they served. White people used this as a tactic to exert their control over the black gaze.
- Even past the time of slavery in the US, habits that uphold white supremacy persist: white people don't need to observe the habits of black people for their own safety and can continue life as though black people are invisible. White people assume that they are similarly invisible to black people. White people might not even think there is a representation of whiteness in the minds of black people that exists based on concrete, consistent observation.

Conceptions of Safety vs. Danger

- White people are socialized to associate whiteness with safety and inherent goodness, while blackness is associated with danger and darkness. White people often believe that this is also the way that black people conceptualize whiteness, ignoring the ways in which whiteness terrorizes and tortures.
- This concept of whiteness exists as a “response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination” (341).
 - Consistent projections of “the Other” as violent terrorists (often represented in discrimination while traveling) enables white people to imagine that there is no representation of whiteness as terror.

White Students' Response to Black Students' Assessment of White People

hooks notes that in classroom discussions, the idea that black people observe white people through a critical lens is both shocking and unsettling to white students.

Often, the shock stems from a “deep emotional investment” in the myth of sameness. White students tend to believe that any observation that draws attention to difference is a threat to the conception that racism will be “cured” when we recognize that we are all just people.

This shock also arises from the discrepancy between ideas of whiteness as “mystery” and disbelief that “the Other” would possess the capabilities to understand the workings of the powerful.

Theorizing and Reconstructing Black experiences

In understanding how black knowledge of whiteness as terror has been built, “we seek to uncover, restore, as well as to deconstruct, so that new paths, different journeys are possible” (342), which threatens the entire system of white supremacy. This new consciousness looks forward towards self-realization and freedom.

In our contemporary period, the eagerness to believe racism no longer exists masks the continued existence of whiteness as terror.

White people committed to antiracism who are reconsidering their position of privilege must work to understand how their cultural practices continue to reinscribe white supremacy.

The association between whiteness and terror must be analyzed to understand how white supremacy was built, how whiteness functions, and how to break the hold of white supremacy in order to free our minds and education.

Hooks, B. (1999). "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination." In *Displacing whiteness: Essays in social and cultural criticism*, edited by Ruth Frankenberg. Durham: Duke University Press.