



THE
WHITE
PEOPLE
SHOW

How to Understand Racism
and Still Be Wrong About It

Kamau Kenyatta

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Songhai Publications

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The White People Show: How To Understand Racism and Still Be Wrong About It

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*Dedicated to my maternal grandparents
Elvie Davis, Sr. and Amanda Davis
Thank you.*

Contents

Acknowledgments	IX
Introduction	XI
- humiliation	2
1. The Gospel of Racism	5
- separation	10
2. The Big Misunderstanding	15
- denial	20
3. What You May Not Know About Racism	27
- snubbed	40
4. The Demonic Invention	43
- imposition	59
5. White People's Fantasy World	61
- liars	69
6. Remember: We Are Not The Racists	71
- rude	82
7. The Era of White Kidnappers	85

- parade	95
8. What Happened To White People?	97
- appointment	112
9. The Backdrop	115
- typical	118
10. The Black White Supremacists	121
11. Where Are All The Racists, Anyway?	131
12. How Has Racism Damaged Our People?	137
13. This Little Light of Mine	149
Notes	164
Works Cited	173
Author's Next Book	178
About The Author	196
Word From the Author	197

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Introduction

Let's start with a question: Can you define racism correctly? Furthermore, what is it and how do most people understand it?

When I began teaching college racism classes, I mistakenly assumed that students knew what it meant. But to my surprise, I found that more than 99% of students held an incorrect definition of its meaning. It did not matter their race, gender, or age. Even more surprising was that after a few semesters of teaching these classes, I discovered that students usually gave similar definitions of the term. And they were always wrong. Given that this popular idea was widespread, I wondered where they had learned this incorrect information. Paying closer attention, I soon found that this mistaken definition of racism was not confined to just college students. It spills out into the larger population in general.

For example, as I watched television programs, I observed people of different races, ages, and backgrounds get into arguments about racism simply because they did not understand the term and used it inappropriately. In most cases, they were speaking about two different things but believed they were talking about the same thing. They would confuse it with other terms like prejudice and discrimination. I noticed that news pundits and talk show hosts' attempts at discussing racism with guests or audiences would, after a

while, have nothing to do with racism. But if you quizzed them, they would swear they are discussing racism. Politicians remain the worst offenders because they tend to pontificate and posture in ways that avoided answering questions put to them about racism. Some of the answers they give on the topic seem almost deliberate misdirection and concocted misunderstanding of the concept.

I have been invited to speak in places where you would think that those in attendance would know what racism meant. In many cases, however, I would discover their ignorance on the subject during the question and answer section of my presentation.

This has led me to one ultimate conclusion. Most people do not know what racism means. I ask again, can you define it correctly? Where did you get that definition? When you talk with others about racism, are you both referring to the same thing? Does it cause conflict and pain? What does that do to your ego? That's what this book is about.

I have written this book to help bring clarity to the discussion of racism. I delve into its meaning, its origins, the desired outcome, and the result of its impact. My purpose here is to help shine light on that which has become muddy, unclear, and crammed with confusion. In so doing, I hope to help you be more informed on the topic so you can talk about it intelligently and from an informed position. As a result of reading this book, you will be able to identify the mistakes others make when you hear them discuss it. The newfound understanding received from reading this content, will prevent you from being wrong when you discuss racism. It will also help you avoid useless and frivolous arguments about racism because you will have the information that will help put it into proper context at your fingertips. The bulk of the information you will discover as a result of my research and experience will help you understand why there is

so much confusion about the term and where it runs off the rails and into the ditch.

Some who read the pages of this book will find themselves feeling uncomfortable admittedly, because it will challenge their long-held, cherished, but erroneous notions of racism. Others will feel confirmation. This is not a book for those who prefer wishy-washy double talk over fact. As the great sangoma, Vasamazulu Credo Mutwa, has stated, *“You cannot fight an evil disease with sweet medicine...and one cannot hope to cure a putrid malady like inter-racial hatred and misunderstanding by mincing words.”*¹ In that spirit, this book will shatter many fallacies about racism which have become accepted as facts over the years simply because few have questioned their accuracy.

I write this book primarily to black people. As such, the redundancy to constantly use the term black is abandoned except where distinctions are necessary for clarity. My rationale is that there has been the tendency among too many of our writers to write as if they are speaking to a white audience primarily and a black audience incidentally. The directive of the sage, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, comes to mind when he stated, *“Write first to your own people.”* Poet bell hooks is more pointed on the matter when she complains: *“We produce cultural criticism in the context of white supremacy. At times, even the most progressive and well-meaning white folks, who are friends and allies, may not understand why a black writer has to say something a certain way, or why we may not want to explain what has been said as though the first people we must always be addressing are privileged white readers.”* Those of us who write to white audiences on this topic do so, I surmise, in the hopes that somehow the message, the moral message, will get through to them. This is not such a book. I do not write in hopes that white people will

hear and repent of the wrongs they and their ancestors have done against us. That day has passed.

My interest is not, “How do we get through to these people (white people)?” We cannot, at least not enough of them to matter. The issue, the question is “How can we live victoriously along with them?” If we are seeking change, the ones among us who are ready to see through the smoke and mirrors of racism are the ones we can influence the most. In the meantime, we do so while enduring and experiencing the presence and influence of those who embrace and practice the doctrine of racism whether wittingly or not.



Occasionally you will see the Aya Adinkra symbol. It symbolizes our endurance, independence, defiance against difficulties, hardiness, perseverance, and resourcefulness.

You will also notice that throughout the book I use the terms racism and white supremacy synonymously. That is deliberate, and I discuss it in detail in Chapter Three.

I opine that if such clarity as set forth herein is not brought to the surface of our consciousness, as a people, we risk being tricked into a slavery worse than our ancestors previously endured.

—*Kamau Kenyatta*—

Part 1
Center Stage



humiliation

I grew up in South Carolina when overt racism/white supremacy existed in the USA. It was humiliating and dangerous for us. I remember how my grandfather and all the men in our community were expected to behave in the presence of white males.

“You ready to take your ‘bacco (tobacco) to market, Elvie?”

The little white boy who asked my grandfather that question was no more than twelve or thirteen years old. My grandfather, a man in his fifties at the time, removed his hat and put on a big smile and answered, *“Yes, sir, Mr. Hally.* That was the expected, accepted and normal response to an inquiry from any white person regardless of age, education, or status. Instead of referring to my grandfather as Mr. Davis, the little white boy, and others his age, would call him by his first name as if he were a child of their age. The same was true of white women and little white girls regarding the men and women of our community. If these social rules of conduct were not strictly followed by our people, or if they dared to challenge the norm, the results would be further humiliation that could open the door to more degrading and devastating consequences that would be decisive, swift, and, in some cases, deadly.

As I watched this customary exchange for the first time early in my life at the age of five or six, it confused me. Reason being that in my family and the families of our community, all children were taught that it was a sign of great disrespect to call an adult by their

first name. This lesson was engrained into us by my grandparents and every adult in our community. So, when we spoke with an adult, regardless of their color, we would call them *Mr. This* or *Mrs. That*. We were never allowed as children to call any adult by their first name. But here was this young white boy addressing my grandfather by his first name, and my grandfather spoke back to the boy as if the little boy was older than him—like he was an adult.

This was one of the many lessons I learned early in life about the mores of racism/white supremacy in the town and state in which I grew up—Timmonsville, South Carolina. ¹ I later learned that racism/white supremacy was not something unique to our town, but it was state and nation-wide. In fact, I would later discover that it was world-wide and like volcanic lava, it is a destructive force designed to destroy all in its path.

Chapter 1



The Gospel of Racism

WE ALL AGREE THAT racism/white supremacy is a problem. But it is not just *a* problem. It is *the* problem—an uncomfortable one at that. I have, in fact, identified it as the number one problem facing our people worldwide. It is the problem that, if seen properly and addressed correctly, will significantly solve all other problems. Those things that we commonly identify as problems are actually symptoms of the problem. The symptoms I speak of include the issues regarding inequality and inequity that we experience in education, economics, housing, health, law, labor, religion, politics, and entertainment. The problems we encounter in all those areas find their roots in racism/white supremacy.

For example, we have been led to believe that if we could change the laws and have more of our people in political offices, or if we obtained better jobs, things will be better. Presumably, some things might get better. Laws, however, have been changed, but they are not enforced, or they get reversed. In essence, they do nothing in eliminating racism/white supremacy. Many of us have super great jobs but we still encounter racism in the workplace regardless of the position or the industry. We have more college educated graduates than ever, and still we are confronted with the ubiquity of

racism/white supremacy. When we attempt to address any of the singular symptoms thus mentioned, we miss the mark. To use a trite expression, it's like putting bandages on a gunshot wound. It may look as if you're attending to the wound while not really addressing *the* problem—the bullet and the shooter.

How Is Racism/White Supremacy the Problem?

Racism/White Supremacy is the problem we are faced with regardless of our achievements or lack of achievements. It is what we encounter at all levels of life everyday no matter where we may go from the halls of political power, supreme courts, classrooms, or jailhouses. Many of us have wrongly equated positions with power. We have mistakenly identified status and wealth as eliminators of racism/white supremacy. The truth is, it does not matter what our educational and economic status, or our religious and political affiliations are in life. It matters not whether we're healthy or sick, young or old, tall or short, fat or skinny, single, married or divorce. It does not matter if we are a felon, or if we are famous. It matters not the shade of our complexion whether it is light, dark, or somewhere in between. We are all faced with the problem of racism/white supremacy. It does not matter if we're in the USA, England, France, Germany, China, Japan, the Caribbean, Brazil, Argentina, Columbia, Australia and anywhere on the continent of Africa. It does not matter how much we smile and agree or how much we shuck and jive, how high we jump and run, or how much we sing and dance to get along, racism/white supremacy is the one constant that threads through it all. It is at the root and the gospel of life as we know it in the western world.

We are denied employment, housing, and loans because of it. If we have a job, all too often we are denied equitable promotions or

skipped over because of it. Our fight to gain and maintain the right to vote in the USA was and is because of it. The denial to be part of labor unions was because of it. The necessity to fight to have laws enacted for our benefit is because of racism/white supremacy. The denial to live in the house of any neighborhood of our choice and income ability is connected to it. The denial of bank loans and credit for housing or to open a business or to pay for higher education is because of it. The fact that our mortality rate is higher due to either no health care, insufficient health care, or living in polluted environments where we are susceptible to life threatening diseases are the results of racism/white supremacy.

The reality that we are the products of an educational system designed to intentionally mis-educate us about ourselves is a factor of racism/white supremacy. The certitude that we are some of the biggest proponents of the two religions, Christianity and Islam, that first proclaimed to the world that we were savages and brutally enslaved us for hundreds of years is a testament to the diabolical efficiency and insidiousness of racism/white supremacy. The fact that some of the most well-paid and famous among us acquired their wealth by being entertainers who either ran fast, jumped higher, hit harder, sang louder, danced better, or told jokes that humiliated themselves and our communities and at the same time made white folks laugh while posing no threat to their comfortable lifestyles and privileges is all the result of racism/white supremacy.

In the words of the late eminent law scholar and civil rights activist, Derrick Bell,

“Racial bias in the pre-Brown era was stark, open, unalloyed with hypocrisy and blank-faced lies. We blacks, when rejected, knew who our enemies were. They were not us! Today, because bias is masked in

*unofficial practices and “neutral” standards, we must wrestle with the question whether race or some individual failing has cost us the job, denied us the promotion, or prompted our being rejected as tenants for an apartment. Either conclusion breeds frustration and alienation—and a rage we dare not show to others or admit to ourselves.”*¹

We Used To Be Clear About Racism

The intentional message conveyed to my grandfather by reducing him, other adult men, and women in our community to the status of children was that they were inferior to whites. By inferior, I mean that they were thought of as less valuable, not as important, and not worthwhile as humans who felt love, pain, rejection, happiness, or respect as do all humans. They were depicted as lazy, shiftless, and having no aspirations or dreams for themselves and their families. They did not matter to white people. Their feelings and well-being did not matter. As white people saw it, they were put on the earth only to serve them, their interests and well-being. And the reason being is that white people believed themselves to be more important, more valuable, and worthwhile humans who deserved respect, privilege and status simply because they possessed skin that was white. That is racism in its purest form. As such, the treatment of our people as equals deserving of respect was non-existent and, in the minds of whites, impossible and undesirable.

The message that was sent to both black and white people was unambiguous and crystal-clear racism. Neither group was confused about what it was, who was responsible for it and who perpetrated it upon the other. That undebatable message communicated that those

About The Author



Kamau Kenyatta is a Professor of African American Studies at both Lafayette College and Northampton Community College. He is a former Professor of Africana Studies at William Paterson University where he taught racism and sexism classes for more than a decade. Kenyatta is an author whose works include, *The White People Show: How to Understand Racism and Still Be Wrong About It*, *Black Folk's Hair Revisited: Secrets, Shame & Liberation* (co-authored), and *The Confessions of a College Professor*.

He also writes fiction, on subjects related to the African World Experience, in *The Will C. Wright Files* series. Kamau lives in Pennsylvania and spends his free time playing drums in a popular 10-piece funk band.

Find out more about Professor Kenyatta at <https://www.professorkenyatta.com/>. The professor is available for interviews, podcasts, and speaking engagements.