



Understanding Whiteness

Dr. Michaela Null

for

Wright Memorial Public Library

What is whiteness?

First, what is RACE?

- An idea, not a biological fact
- Definition changes over time
- How we categorize people based on our perception of certain physical traits, which we associate with certain characteristics

Often used as a sign of:

- Who is good/bad, civilized/uncivilized, intelligent/unintelligent, beautiful/ugly, etc.





Racial Categorization

- Categories are not random or supported by science
- Created, curated, and promoted by white supremacy that existed or exists in our:
 - Culture
 - Science
 - Interactions
 - Politics
 - Systems



Video: The Origins of Race

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVxAlmAPHec>

History of Whiteness

- **White did not always exist as a category**
- **Created and perpetuated by wealthy to divide and conquer the poor**
 - Kept poor whites and poor/enslaved Blacks from seeing common interests
 - Maintained the system of slavery that kept some wealthy





Social Meanings of Whiteness

**Used as the standard for humans,
against which others are measured**

Whiteness equated with “purity”

- Racial purity (ex. one drop rule)
- Sexual purity (ex. white women)
- Goodness

Eugenics Movement



Video: Talking Black in America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMJINd2vQR4>

Why talk about whiteness?

- We must understand whiteness in order to understand racism and racial inequality
- When we talk about race, we usually don't talk about whiteness
- To understand how a system works, we look at
 - 1) people who created it
 - 2) people who benefit from it
 - 3) people with power—rather than the people who are oppressed by it

Why talk about whiteness?

- White supremacy aims to blame inequality on supposed biological and/or cultural difference
- This distracts us from shining a light on whiteness, the system of white supremacy, and our participation in it

Systemic Racism & Systemic Privilege

- Racism is more than individual actions or beliefs and made of more than a few instances
- Racism as a system
- Systemic = big picture, patterns
- Not apparent to those with privilege

Systems can refer to:

- Systems of symbols
- Norms, rules, policies, laws
- Structures, like organizations, institutions, government, economy

Systemic Privilege


Privilege is made up of taken-for-granted benefits given to a large group of people based on a trait

Can be seen in things like health outcomes, representation





Whiteness and Racism

- We can reproduce, participate in, and be complicit in white supremacy without being white supremacists
 - Focus on outcomes, consequences, and facts---not intentions
 - White supremacy relies on our:
 - Complicity
 - Desire for comfort
 - Focus on individuals
- 

Challenging White Supremacy

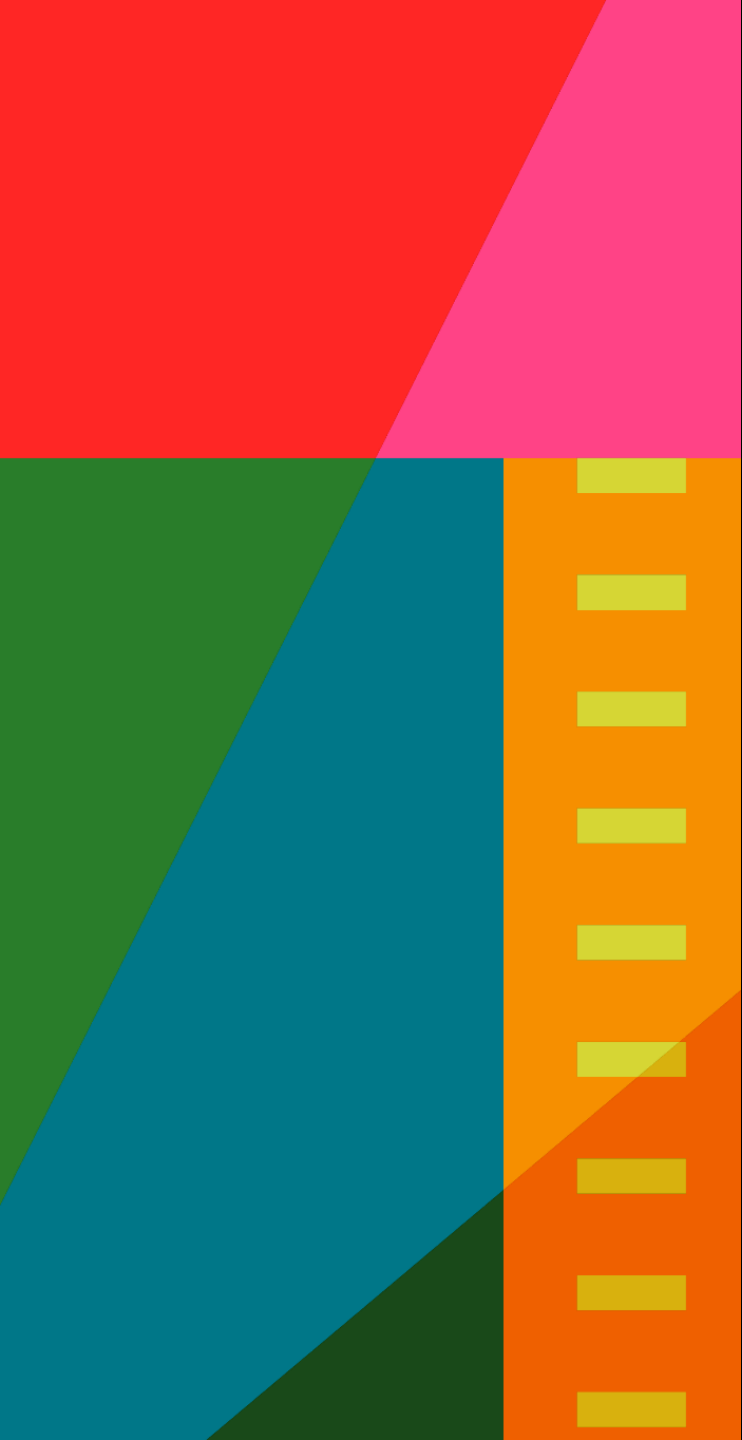
- Center POC, particularly Black and Indigenous culture, perspectives, experiences
 - DO NOT center yourself, your emotions, or your experiences
 - Listen to and amplify voices of POC
- Do not appropriate culture
- Err on the side of not doing harm
- Utilize white privilege for anti-racist means



Challenging White Supremacy

- Educate yourself and do the work
 - Do NOT rely on POC to:
 - Educate you
 - Speak up about racism and white supremacy
- If something potentially racist or based in white supremacy is pointed out to you
 - Apologize and deeply consider it—perhaps even do some research
 - Do not try to explain it away





Q&A



Select Resources

Documentaries

- Race: The Power of an Illusion (Episodes 1-3)
- Talking Black in America
- An Outrage
- Cracking the Codes: The System of Racial Inequity

Websites

- <http://www.pbs.org/race>
- <https://www.talkingblackinamerica.org/>
- <https://www.an-outrage.com/>
- <https://www.world-trust.org/cracking-the-codes>