

*From an email I received from Charles A. Lewis, a person I have never met – our paths first crossed when we were both supporting the Presidential candidacy of Senator Obama back in 2008. I have continued to follow Chuck's musings, which I find to be very thoughtful and thought-provoking.*

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... where did this idea of “race,” especially Blackness, come from?

... race is not based on biology. It's a social construct, devised by humans to privilege Whites like me.

Prof. Ibram X. Kendi of Rutgers and his book *How to Be an Antiracist* provide some answers (I see the book has attracted a lot of attention in the last two weeks.) I met Prof. Kendi here in Evanston when he was on tour for this book. His first one, *Stamped from the Beginning*, won the National Book Award.

I also heard Prof. Kendi on the second episode of the *Seeing White* series. In that episode, Nell Irvin Painter, an emeritus professor of history at Princeton and author of *The History of White People*, asserted that going back to ancient Greece, from which much of our Western cultures derive, “there was no notion of race.” But, there was a belief that even democratic Greece considered itself superior to other societies and peoples. It created hierarchies. (There are some excerpts from that episode in the first attachment.)

For millennia, slavery was practiced widely by many civilizations, frequently as a result of conquest – but, without reference to any of the indicators of race, as we now know them, like skin color.

John Biewen (of Scene on Radio): “The Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese, the West African kingdoms. They all practiced forms of slavery. And people of every color got enslaved.”

For eons, what we now call economics was the principal reason people were enslaved – to steal their labor. Rationalizations of that theft formed the basis for the biases and stereotyping with which we are so familiar today. Not the other way around.”

Here's the crux of the matter. Prof. Kendi argues that the “first race maker and crafter of racist ideas” was Gomes de Zurara, who chronicled the African slave trade of Portuguese Prince Henry the Navigator in the mid-1400s. In the book he published in 1453, *The Chronical of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, Zurara concocted the first racist ideas in order to rationalize and sanitize Prince Henry's evil deeds. “The obedient...Zurara created racial difference to convince the world that Prince Henry (and thus Portugal) did not slave-trade for money, only to save souls.” I have included in the second attachment some pertinent excerpts from Prof. Kendi's book.

So, race and schools are inextricably intertwined – and even more so as the pandemic preys more perniciously on black and brown communities and their students and as some police forces prey on those same communities. Our schools need to be supported and protected by their exoskeletons. Our citizens need to be served and protected by their police.

Please, as always, pass it along.

Chuck

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["Attachment Two"]

Excerpts from *How to Be an Antiracist*, pages 38-43

Some White people...avoid reckoning with the ways that Whiteness—even as a construction and mirage—has informed their notions of America and identity and offered them privilege, the primary one being the privilege of being inherently normal, standard, and legal. It is a racial crime to be yourself if you are not White in America...

Race creates new forms of power: the power to categorize and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude. Race makers use that power to process distinct individuals, ethnicities, and nationalities into monolithic races.

The first global power to construct race happened to be the first racist power and the first exclusive slave trader of the constructed race of African people. The individual who orchestrated this trading of an invented people...created the first transatlantic slave-trading [business]...Prince Henry the Navigator, the brother and then uncle of Portuguese kings, is the first character in the history of racist power...

Until his death in 1460, Prince Henry sponsored Atlantic voyages to West Africa by the Portuguese, to circumvent Islamic slave traders, and in doing so created a different sort of slavery than had existed before. Premodern Islamic slave traders, like their Christian counterparts in premodern Italy, were not pursuing racist policies—they were enslaving what we now consider to be Africans, Arabs, and Europeans alike. At the dawn of the modern world, the Portuguese began to exclusively trade African bodies...Prince Henry's sailors made history when they navigated past the feared "black" hole of Cape Bojador, off Western Sahara, and brought enslaved Africans back to Portugal.

Prince Henry's first biographer—and apologist—became the first race maker and crafter of racist ideas. King Afonso V commissioned Gomes de Zurara, a royal chronicler...to compose a glowing biography of the African adventures of his "beloved uncle." Zurara finished *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* in 1453, the first European book on Africa...

...French poet Jacques de Brézé first used the term "race" in a 1481 hunting poem. In 1606, [a French] diplomat...formally defined race for the first time in a major European dictionary.

“Race...means descent,” Jean Nicot wrote in the *Trésor de la langue française*...to make races was to make racial hierarchy.

Gomes de Zurara grouped all those peoples from Africa into a single race for that very reason: to create hierarchy, the first racist idea. Race making is an essential ingredient in the making of racist ideas, the crust that holds the pie. Once a race has been created, it must be filled in—and Zurara filled it with negative qualities that would justify Prince Henry’s evangelical mission to the world. This Black race of people was lost, living “like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings,” Zurara wrote. “They had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in a bestial sloth...”

in 1735, Carl Linnaeus locked in the racial hierarchy of humankind in *Systema Naturae*. He color-coded the races as White, Yellow, Red, and Black. He attached each race to one of the four regions of the world and described their characteristics. The Linnaeus taxonomy became the blueprint that nearly every enlightened race maker followed and that race makers still follow today. And, of course, these were not simply neutral categories, because races were never meant to be neutral categories. Racist power created them for a purpose.

Linnaeus positioned *Homo sapiens europaeus* at the top of the racial hierarchy...He made up the middling racial character of *Homo sapiens asiaticus*... He granted the racial character of *Homo sapiens americanus* [the third position]... At the bottom of the racial hierarchy, Linnaeus positioned *Homo sapiens afer*...

The obedient Gomes de Zurara created racial difference to convince the world that Prince Henry (and thus Portugal) did not slave-trade for money, only to save souls...

Prince Henry’s racist policy of slave trading came first—a cunning invention for the practical purpose of bypassing Muslim traders. After nearly two decades of slave trading, King Afonso asked Gomes de Zurara to defend the lucrative commerce in human lives, which he did through the construction of a Black race, an invented group upon which he hung racist ideas. This cause and effect—a racist power creates racist policies out of raw self-interest; the racist policies necessitate racist ideas to justify them—lingers over the life of racism...

the root problem—from Prince Henry to President Trump—has always been the self-interest of racist power. Powerful economic, political, and cultural self-interest—the primitive accumulation of capital in the case of royal Portugal and subsequent slave traders—has been behind racist policies. Powerful and brilliant intellectuals in the tradition of Gomes de Zurara then produced racist ideas to justify the racist policies of their era, to redirect the blame for their era’s racial inequities away from those policies and onto people.

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“Attachment One”

Scene on Radio

How Race Was Made (Seeing White, Part 2): Transcript

<https://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-32-how-race-was-made-seeing-white-part-2/>

[emphases added]

John Biewen: But here's a thought I had about the starting point, which is, when I was in high school, in Minnesota in the late 1970s, I can still remember very vividly in my social studies textbook, the three races of man.

That's Nell Irvin Painter – historian, Princeton Professor Emerita, and author of *The History of White People*. The three races – in the order usually presented, Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid [with] Caucasoid at the top – is not a biological fact, and only became science, in the sense of anthropologists said that this is true, in the 1940s.

Suzanne Plihcik: (She is with the Racial Equity Institute [which does] anti-racism workshops.) So we... need to know how we got this thing called race, if we're gonna understand racism....Anthropologists finally say... that race is anthropological nonsense.

Is that the same thing as saying it's not real? No, because it's real. It is powerfully real. It's politically and socially real. So we need to know, how did we get it. And what we say is, we constructed it.

John Biewen: To tell the story of the construction of race, and therefore of whiteness, let's go back to the beginnings of Western civilization.

Nell Irvin Painter: We go back to Greece because that's where we think of as our cultural beginnings.

John Biewen: And in ancient Greece, ...

Nell Irvin Painter: There was no notion of race! ...

John Biewen: So, if race didn't exist for the Greeks, does that mean they saw all humans as equal? Uh, no.

Nell Irvin Painter: For culture, the ancient Greeks naturally thought that their culture was the best and that they were the civilized people and other people were barbarians.

John Biewen: But if all that slavery in the ancient world was not about race because race hadn't been invented yet, well, who did invent it, and when?

Ibram Kendi: ...I'm an assistant professor of history at the University of Florida [now at Rutgers].

John Biewen: Ibram Kendi's book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 2016.

John Biewen: In 1453, the king of Portugal...hired [Gomes de] Zurara to write a biography of the king's uncle, Infante Henrique, better known as Prince Henry the Navigator.

Ibram Kendi: Who...was the first major slave trader to exclusively enslave and trade in African...in the mid-1400s.

John Biewen: It was the first time Europeans sailed to sub-Saharan Africa to seize captives directly, rather than buying sub-Saharan slaves from north African middlemen...Zurara portrayed slavery as an improvement over freedom in Africa, where, he wrote, "They lived like beasts." They "had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth."

Ibram Kendi: And so I basically make the case that he was the first articulator of racist ideas. And in order for him to articulate racist ideas, he had to...combine all of the different ethnic groups [from Africa] that Prince Henry was enslaving into one people, and then describing that people as inferior.

And so presumably, then, though he did not necessarily speak as much about whiteness, he certainly created blackness. And blackness of course cannot really operate without whiteness.

John Biewen, to Kendi: So, it's fair to say literally that slave traders commissioned the invention of this sort of codified racist idea, of black people and implicitly, then, on the other hand, of white people.

Ibram Kendi: Yes.

John Biewen: Zurara's writings were widely circulated among the elite in Portugal. In the coming years, the Portuguese, and their ideas about Africans, led the way as the African slave trade expanded among countries like Spain, Holland, France, and England.

Ibram Kendi: And then by the 1500s, you had other ideologues expressing similar ideas about African people. So the concept of the beast becomes sort of the way in which, for instance, the first British slave traders described African people.

John Biewen: When the British colonists came to the United States, what would become the United States, they were steeped in these ideas, is that fair to say?

Ibram Kendi: Yes.

Nell Irvin Painter: During the Enlightenment, Linnaeus [wrote] *Systemae Naturæ*, it's 1758. And then Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in Gottingen, Germany...by the 1780s and the 1790s using the word "Caucasian" for white people.

John Biewen: Linnaeus named four human races, Blumenbach five. That was just the beginning of an unending argument about how to do the impossible, how to separate humanity neatly into distinct groups. Much later, an American anthropologist would say, no, it's three races. The three in my high school textbook.