

America's Addiction to White Supremacy

America's addiction to the notion of white supremacy is not surprising. When America was founded, only nations led by kings existed. America was the first "nation-state," which would be governed by laws instead of monarchs. But the very concept of a "nation" is bound up in biology. The "state" part is the laws, the government buildings, the border passes. The root word "*nati*" means "birth," and the term "nation" was invented to describe a group of people who shared not just territorial borders, but biological ties. Every country in Europe identified with an ethnic group (or "tribe") that had its origins in centuries of relatively isolated biological commingling: the British had the Britons and the Angles, the French had the Franks, the Germans had the Teutons. And so the concept of the "nation-state" was invented to include a dominant "nation." But since colonial America was comprised of various ethnic groups from all over Europe, and since the narrative of race was being invented at the exact same time by the exact same people, America's "nation" became not a European ethnic group, but the "white" race.

For most of America's history, the dominant narrative suggested that to be "American" meant "assimilation," an idea best captured by the "melting pot": look American, act American, be American. This resulted in many people de-accentuating their European or African or Asian cultures when they came to America and instead buying blue jeans. That narrative began to change, however, during WWII, when America needed a counternarrative to Hitler's aggression. Hitler was a dyed-in-the-wool eugenicist, and to justify recruitment, the U.S. War Department had to explain how racism wasn't the American way—even though eugenics had also been highly popular in America in the 1930s. In addition, both the Germans and the Japanese had launched propaganda campaigns against African American and Japanese American soldiers, ridiculing them for fighting for a country that discriminated against them. It was during this time that one began to see calls against racism from America's mainstream—because of the *war* effort—and it was the children of that generation who began to value "cultural diversity" over "assimilation" in the 1960s, the dawn of the postmodern era. During that time, the dominant narrative on what "being an American citizen was" changed, and people were encouraged to express their native cultures. This was when every single university ethnic-studies program in America was founded. Historians started telling the stories of indigenous peoples. Native Americans began learning their old languages. Japanese Americans began to speak out about internment. African Americans started wearing dashikis.

But this was a challenge to "what being an American citizen was" had always been. That is why so many Americans are so loathe to let go of America's identification with "whiteness," and have been fighting against it ever since the 1960s Countercultural Movement. It was a really big time in America's maturity to let go of our attachment to "nation" and to foreground the "state" part. All are now equal under the law. Or at least striving to be so. We must empathize with those who still find this transition hard, but we must never tire in our efforts to help them fight their addictions.