



White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812

Winthrop D. Jordan

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The Englishmen in Jamestown who greeted the first "twenty Negars" who arrived in 1619 had already acquired an attitude toward the Negro—from tradition, from religion, from earlier European contacts with Africans. And as the Englishman became the colonial, and then the revolutionary patriot, and finally the citizen of a new nation, seeking to find his identity in a new land, he created chattel slavery and was in turn confronted by it.

White Over Black is Winthrop D. Jordan's masterly study of that process, from the 16th century through the early years of the Republic.

White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 Details

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From Reader Review White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 for online ebook

Cathie Wright-Lewis says

Painfully truthful and necessary.

Joseph Stieb says

I tend to divide the school books I read into 3 categories. The first category is the truly academic books that would really only be interesting to other academics (and sometimes not even). Just trying to communicate the messages of many of these books to a non-historian or even a non-American historian is tedious and frequently (and often deservedly) provokes the response "There's an entire book on that!?!" The second category features truly interesting, readable, and challenging books that I would recommend to non-academics who are interested in a certain topic. A Land So Strange, Inhuman Bondage, River of Dark Dreams, and The Radicalism of the American Revolution all fit into this topic. I think that people should be aware of the stories and major arguments in these books and that most people would enjoy reading them. Ok, most smaaart people.

White over Black fits perfectly in the second category: Books that I would never recommend that people read, although I still think that communicating the book's main ideas is very important and that most people would find those ideas interesting. At 600 pages of dense scholarship, this was not an easy read. By the last 200 pages, I had found several areas that should have been chopped down or consolidated considerably. Nevertheless, this book tells a vital story about American history, the history of race and slavery, and human nature in general.

Jordan threw himself into the chicken/egg debate with this book. This historiographical debate was about whether racism had preceded slavery or whether slavery caused racism. While the debate was always about degrees of precedence and causation, Jordan simultaneously breaks the dichotomy down while also making a pretty good case for racism first. He shows that Euro-American views of blacks have virtually always been negative, that this negativity was a vital reason why whites enslaved blacks and not poor whites or Indians (as much), and that racism was intensified and systematized, but not created by mass enslavement of blacks in America starting in the late 17th century. Jordan plunges into fascinating discussions of Western culture's oscillation between environmentalist and innate explanations of human traits and the consequences of these beliefs for politics. The Revolution, for instance, occurred at a time of strong environmentalist thinking, which raised anti-slavery hopes that blacks were only "stupid and dangerous" because of the degrading influence of slavery, leaving the door open for their ennobling through emancipation. Jordan's charting of the decline of anti-slavery after the Revolution was fascinating, and I basically buy his argument that the early Republic retreated significantly from the republican, egalitarian, enlightened values of the Revolutionary period. Finally, it was cool to see how racism closed off so many routes away from slavery, even for a revolutionary generation that was highly ambivalent to the institution. Because they could not imagine a biracial society (even though many imagined the same with Indians), they took few solid steps against slavery, toyed with ludicrous solutions like colonization, and eventually saw the anti-slavery movement peter out into a dramatic revival.

These are all points that I hope to get across to people in course material, although I would never inflict this overcooked book on undergraduates or friends in general. Lastly, I usually don't make the inclusiveness criticism of academic books (the author didn't include the perspectives of whatever marginalized group), but it's actually a fair point to make of this book. I would have really liked to see what women thought about blacks throughout this period, particularly because white men were so concerned with protecting/controlling them from lascivious, aggressive black men.

Jackie says

Excerpt from my essay:

Jordan introduces a progression of arenas through which notions of black equality were considered, cumulatively painting a feasible picture of why many white peoples' stances had shifted in favor of black emancipation by the time of the Civil War. Religion, society, and politics each contributed substantially to the gradual wave of changing perceptions, and none could have likely affected change on its own. The fact that undercurrents of human equality consistently accompany Jordan's analysis of even the bitterest interracial trends perhaps tells us as much about Jordan's sentiments as a historian than they do about the actual historical events. Firmly grounded in the liberal tradition, Jordan intently highlights the fact that waves of opposition, however small, existed in various incarnations throughout the years of the slave trade. Written during a time when civil rights battles dominated headlines, Jordan's frequent mention of human equality may possibly be a nod to the modern era, a thru-line upon which the contemporary reader may connect. Indeed, Jordan's exploration of the various premises for equality begs us to question the basis upon which we consider our own.

Kari says

You gotta be ready to read for this one. But it is well worth it. Dr. Jordan covers the chronology of the development of the "inherent sense of superiority" many white Americans hold, covering the history of thought from 1500-1800s. The English language changed several times during those 300 years, so it takes diligence to stick with the text.

Lynne Mcgready says

I read this book several years ago. I struggled with it initially but then reading it a second time realised that it was quite simple, if I put my mind to it and adopted the patient attitude that he used when writing the book.

I believe that while the book discusses a period between 1550 and 1812 the subject still remains relevant today, not just in America but around the world. It is as if generation after generation since the period researched by Mr. Jordan have followed and still follow the rules of separation of human beings based on their 'skin colour'.

Jonathan says

Another classic I got to late. Impressive but too much of it has been absorbed into later writing, didn't get much that was new.

Z. Taylor says

This is one of the best books that has ever been written in ANY genre. Read it. Read it!

Velvetink says

Charity store find a few weeks ago. Forgot to add it. Mine has a different cover.

John says

This is a pretty old book at this point, and a little dated, but it is still a fascinating read. What Jordan attempts to do here is trace the contributing factors behind an attitude. Why did Europeans choose to enslave and abuse Africans in the English colonies? Where did racist assumptions about Africans come from? Jordan is interested not in the people at whom bigotry was directed, but rather at the attitudes of the bigots. These attitudes, he writes, have a history, and he is operating under the assumption that such attitudes are “discrete entities susceptible of historical analysis.” To analyze them, Jordan pours over the writings of Englishmen and Euro-Americans from the mid-16th to the early 19th century, picking apart any and all sorts of references to Africans. He also explores the social history of England and compares it with developments in England’s colonies, to trace the divergences sparked by the increasing presence of Africans and chattel slavery in America. Analysis of English and Euro-American society, Jordan hopes, will allow us to grasp how racist ideas emerged, because “no ‘idea’...exists in isolation from the society in which it flourishes.” This leads to a sort of psychoanalytic history, which is an approach that is not very common in the historiography anymore. It seems useful though, because some elements of the rise of racism in America are very difficult to explain if historians are trying to tie them to concrete historical developments. Psychology may shed some light on them. One key example that Jordan returns to repeatedly is what we might call the “projection” theory: “white men projected their own conflicts” onto black people. For instance, whites in the late 18th and early 19th century tried to limit manumission of slaves, promoted colonization plans designed to deport blacks out of the country, and even attempted to re-enslave already free blacks. They did this not because of any new, concrete threat but because of an obsession with preventing racial intermixture. Whites were convinced that miscegenation was simultaneously out of the question and totally unavoidable if blacks became free. As Jordan notes, this obsession says more about whites than blacks. Euro-Americans were afraid of losing their own identity; they could not allow the new freedoms of America to make them into a different people. They were afraid of losing control, and they projected this paranoia onto blacks. So anyway, I could see someone reading this and dismissing it, because the language is dated and maybe you think psychoanalyzing historical subjects is inappropriate. But Jordan certainly proposes some interesting interpretations of American history, and anyone working on race and early America really ought to consider them.

Miriam says

Jordan chronicles the history of attitudes toward and ideas about people of darker skins. In this book he pioneered the then-controversial "social mirror" thesis of racism, in which other cultures are used as vehicles for discussion of social problems or aspects of ones own culture that are taboo, awkward, unspeakable, etc. This is particularly true of England's attitudes towards her non-white colonies.

Robert Owen says

In "White over Black; American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812" historian Winthrop Jordan summarizes the sometimes spotty colonial and revolutionary American historical record in order to unearth the origins of white hostility towards blacks. What emerges is a fascinating story of a community whose evolution is guided by the indivisible forces of an undeclared and largely unconscious moral war.

The introduction of slavery in North America, contends Jordan, just kind of happened. Although the original 17th century English settlers had no particular historical traditions that would tend to encourage slavery (indeed, if anything, it had quite the opposite), contempt for the poor and laboring classes of the sort that sanctioned and encouraged exploitation and abuse was part and parcel of the English concept of societal hierarchy. Yet as loathsome and cruel as the original leading colonists were to their poor, white indentured servants, there remained, nonetheless, a fundamental respect for the nominal rights of an Englishman. Although the historical record is ambiguous and full of holes, it appears as though the original colonists tended, at least at first, to be inclined to confer some semblance of those same rights upon those few African slaves who were imported to North America in the first few decades of colonization. Yet blackness, with its attendant cultural associations with evil, malice and filth (the cultural opposite of whiteness) was a tantalizing riddle to the English. Seen as savage, lascivious, barbaric and, above all, heathen, the few blacks introduced into colonies during the 17th century seemed somehow separate and contemptible relative to the white indentured servants beside whom they were forced to labor. This emerging sense of "difference" found expression in the passage of increasingly harsh laws throughout the latter half of the century which disqualified blacks from enjoying those nominal rights naturally due to an Englishman and established the legal framework for racial slavery. By the beginning of the 18th century, the Englishman's demand that he never be treated like a slave became synonymous with never being treated like a black, and so, self-aggrandizing racial supremacy insinuated itself into the cultural DNA of the white settlers.

Once established, racial slavery assumed in the 18th century its own self-perpetuating, sophistry-rich logic. It was originally argued, for example, that English religious tradition foreswore the enslavement of fellow Christians. But what would happen if a slave could be saved? In keeping with the spirit of the First Great Awakening that increasingly insisted that it was the duty of Christians to bring the unsaved to God, Christianizing slaves came to be seen as a potentially self-destructive religious obligation. What followed over the first decades of the century were debates about 1) whether a black even could be saved, 2) whether a black would benefit from being saved 3) whether it was wise, notwithstanding religious duty, to introduce the slave to religious concepts that endorsed equality before God of all human sinners, slave or no, and, ultimately, 4) whether enslaving fellow Christians was really that big a deal after all.

In similar fashion, Jordan traces the trajectory of tortured thought throughout the course of the 18th and early

19th century. At the time of the American Revolution, slavery represented a troubling paradox for a people who had come to identify with the inspiring natural rights doctrine of the Enlightenment and debate reluctantly raged around notions of liberty and equality in a country that kept fully 20% of its inhabitants in bondage. Yet for all of the debate, the early Americans could never get out of the way of their own white supremacist assumptions. Under the force of racial doctrine, for example, the clear and cogent Linnaean taxonomy devolved into the widely accepted pseudo-scientific “Chain of Being” that posited intermediate stages of creatures in the roster of God’s creation in which Africans stood below the white man and above the ape, suggesting notions that blacks, while being man-like, were not men in the sense of being natural rights beneficiaries.

By the end of the 18th century, one senses that whites of the era were haunted by slavery. Unable to satisfactorily reconcile its rightness in terms of principle (which, for devotees of the Enlightenment, was a big fail) and yet afraid to end it for economic, social and safety reasons, whites of the Revolutionary era came to see slavery as a necessary evil which they pathetically hoped, over time, would simply go away. Of course, the later history which Jordan does not address in his work, witnessed whites of the south reconciling their evident Revolutionary-era cognitive dissonance by recasting slavery from a “necessary evil” to a “positive good”, thus setting the nation on the course for civil war.

Jordan’s work results in a thorough and cogent catalog of white thought and experience with respect to “blackness” throughout the first two centuries of European settlement of North America. As such, it both tells a compelling story and represents a tremendous resource for anyone interested in understanding America’s racial history.

Karen says

Outdated in places, but it holds up fairly well. This is the first of many books I'm reading on race and slavery issues for historiographical background, I'll be interested to see how the conversation evolved from here.

William Sedlack says

Essential piece of non-fiction that looks at how race relations has developed in our country.

Jenny says

I think every American regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or region should read this book. This is one of those works that transcends time because it gets to the heart of a very tricky yet fundamental issue in our history. By tracing and explaining the origins of slavery in America and framing it in terms of the beliefs held by whites about blacks from 1550 to 1812 and beyond...the reader is left with the grim reality of how slavery was able to sustain itself as an institution for so long in this country. Prepare to learn a lot and get emotional, this is an important (albeit v. long) book.

Mark Bowles says

A. Summary: This book answers one simple question; What were the attitudes of the whites towards blacks during 17th and 18th century America.

B. Genesis (1550-1700)

1. To understand these attitudes, white belief must begin during the first W. African voyages. "Apes of Africa," who were "libidinous" and "savage." For a better discussion of voyagers attitudes toward W. African technologically see Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man*. What was the cause of black color? The sun, Gods curse, defective religion (heathens).

2. Then we turn to the ideas and origins of American slavery. During this period slavery was an "unthinking decision." The first blacks arrive in 1619.

C. Provincial Decades (1700-55). This period was the first in which slavery began to be seen as morally wrong

1. Control: The key question was how to control the black because he would be uncivilized if left by himself. Slave codes helped to control the slave and justify slavery. There was a fear of black freedom and insurrection.

2. Sex: The issue of control was also a problem for the white man and his desire for black sex. Again demographic patterns shaped beliefs on interracial sex. The resulting mulatto was considered black. Dilemma-desire and aversion of blacks.

3. Religion: Religious attitudes also shaped whites attitudes. The whites would not convert the blacks to Christianity as their religion taught them to do. Whites feared that by converting the black their own mental distinction would lessen. Proponents of conversion claimed that blacks were not inherently stupid but they were lesser due to social conditions.

4. Physical: Blacks were seen as fundamentally different from whites (physically). Skin inheritance (acquired characteristics) was being thrown out. Instead, there was a belief that the black skin contained a dark fluid. Hume linked superiority to complexion.

D. Revolutionary era (1755-1783)

1. A tremendous amount of moral examination of slavery occurred in this period. Particularly by the Quakers. After the Great Awakening in 1740 and new revolutionary ideals, Americans became more self-aware of their beliefs.

2. Americans questioned the morality of slavery. They realized that for the first time America had a racial problem. Prejudice as a word itself came into use.

3. The revolutionary ideals of equality had to remove blacks from "all men were created equal"

4. Environmentalism: Men were molded by their surroundings. This is related to Locke's ideas of tabula rasa. All men were the same, only the environment changed them. Abolitionists adopted this argument.

E. Society and Thought (1783-1812). How did the social context affect ideas.

1. A great deal of economic and ideological changes occurred during this period. Agricultural (cotton gin) development and nation building. The revolution ended the slave trade but not slavery. Antislavery societies formed.

2. Humanitarianism became more widespread as the masters began treating the slaves better

3. American revolutionary thinking spread to France, the black island of Santo Domingo, and finally it came full circle to American slaves with Gabriel's slave rebellion in Virginia (1800)

4. This caused the sons to repudiate the founding fathers principles

5. As a result free and religious blacks were separated from the white communities. Separate black churches, exclusion, segregation.

F. Thought and Society (1783-1812). What were the attitudes of articulate white Americans toward blacks

1. Thomas Jefferson's attitudes (dilemma) exemplified the social problem of slavery in a free society. He had a strong hostility to slavery and a deep conviction that blacks were inferior. He doubted their fitness for

freedom

2. The defenders of the fundamental equality of blacks fought Thomas Jefferson's position. They fought for the idea of mental equality.
3. The Great Chain of Being and the Linnaean biological classification system shaped Jefferson's ideas about the inferiority of blacks
4. After 1775 there were a number of studies concerning the anatomical differences between blacks and whites
5. The complexion of the black was questioned. It was hoped that blackness would simply disappear in a different climate. Antislavery advocate Dr. Benjamin Rush claimed that blackness was due to a form of leprosy. Effects of heat differences were also accepted.
6. America was claimed as a white country and there were proposals to remove blacks from the land. These proposals show the fear that whites held concerning racial intermixture. Black insurrection would result from the combination of freedom and the blacks lack of control
