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No Refuge: the Specter of White Supremacy Still Haunts Black America

By Lawrence Ware

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My uncle blamed everything on the white man.

Global warming? It was the white man. Drugs destroying the community? Blame the white man. Football team lost? The white man was at fault.

Uncle John was the kind of ghetto philosopher you'd find dropping knowledge in the barbershop while waiting for a chair to open. He'd probably walked in without an appointment. People would listen half heartedly, passively allowing the words to wash over them. Intermittently the listener would mumble an obligatory "that's deep," meant to acknowledge the passing of time.

He would talk about the way the white man invented AIDS as a way to rid the country of homosexuals. He was convinced that the white man flooded the black community with drugs to undermine the Black Panthers. He thought billiards was a game invented to teach 'red, black, and yellow' people to accept oppression. (The game ends when the WHITE ball knocks the BLACK ball off the GREEN table.) He was convinced he was right.

He wasn't wrong.

While my uncle was incorrect in his assessment that there was a singular white man behind all of these ills, he was right to think that there was something nefarious afoot. He was neither a trained philosopher nor an academic historian, but he had good intuitions. He was unable to name it, but he was talking about white supremacy. bell hooks prefers the term white supremacy over racism because:

...racism in and of itself did not really allow for a discourse of colonization and decolonization, the recognition of the internalized racism within people of color and it was always in a sense keeping things at the level at which whiteness and white people remained at the center of the discussion....In my classroom I might say to students that you know that when we use the term *white supremacy* it doesn't just evoke white people, it evokes a political world that we can all frame ourselves in relationship to...

White supremacy is not an indictment of any one person, but, rather, it is an indictment of a system that permeates all of life in the West. It is as ubiquitous and invisible as the air we breathe—especially in America. In this country there was a relinquishing of white ethnic identity during the Civil War. Wealthy slave owners needed working class European-Americans to be united in their support of the Confederacy, so whiteness as a homogeneous, ontological racial identity was emphasized. It worked brilliantly. Even today this conceptual frame is so strong that many white working class Americans vote against their political and economic interests in an attempt to combat the encroachment of black and brown people upon what their white privilege tells them they deserve. It is because of this white supremacy and white privilege that I understand why, like Lupe Fiasco, a black person might eschew the notion of patriotism. We know too much.

How can I be patriotic when at the time of this country's founding I would have been considered 3/5ths of a human being? How am I supposed to get teary eyed when someone sings America the Beautiful with lynching on my mind? Black people were enslaved longer than we have been free in this country, and upon our release from that evil institution, many white people did all they could to institute Slavery By Another Name. Patriotic Americans intent on keeping freed slaves full of fear founded the KKK. The American government instituted policies that economically, educationally, and politically disenfranchised black people. Then, after the civil rights movement, different policies that were just as racist, but slightly less overt, were enacted that put us in the position we are today. Now, we have Donald Trump gaining support from white Republicans by spewing racist, misogynistic comments and harkening back to an alleged great time in America's past...I'm just not sure which great past deed he wants to revisit.

Maybe he wants to reinstitute slavery or revisit implementing Jim Crow laws in the south. Perhaps he wants to give new blankets tainted with small pox to Native Americans. It could be that he wants to throw new Japanese Americans in internment camps. I'm looking forward to his policy papers telling us what he has on mind.

If nothing else, this summer has taught black people in America one thing: there is no refuge.

If you thought you were safe by embracing respectability and moving to the political right, Trump and his supporters are reminders of what awaits. Wear the suit. Play the game.

Republicans will use your smiling black face to cover up policies that set the clock back on voting rights and fair housing. The police will kill your children, and your political allies will donate money ensuring the killers get out on bond.

If you thought you could find safety from racism by moving to the left, white progressives have shown us what happens if you step out of line. Raise your voice, they say. Speak up for yourself, they declare, but you must do so respectfully. The same progressives that cried crocodile tears while holding #BlackLivesMatter signs have shown their true colors by trying to silence black women they feel have stepped out of line. White progressives that police black political activity are still operating as agents of white supremacy. On the right and on the left—white supremacy is still at work. Black America, you are not safe. Your political allies will not save you.

Uncle John was wrong about a singular white man intent on disenfranchising black people in America. It is not the 'white man' we should be concerned about. White supremacy is the culprit. We must dismantle any system that refuses to see our humanity. It is time to wake up and #StayWoke.