

The Cost of Whiteness



Park Forest, Illinois, 1952¹

In 1948 the largest privately built community in the country opened on a plot of land thirty miles South of the downtown Chicago area. With affordable housing, large manicured lawns, curved roads for slow traffic, and a nearly entirely white neighborhood living in a well kept community far from the city, Park Forest, Illinois became the blueprint for white American isolationism. Following World War II, the infamous white flight of young caucasian families to the suburbs was facilitated by a successful post war economy, the affordability of cars, and

public infrastructure designed to keep these people happy and removed from the rest of the country.² In a 1955 brochure about Park Forest, the suburb promised white families “More personal comfort and security. More friends and fun. More home for a woman to enjoy. And more for a man to come home to.”²

Sixty miles north of Park Forest is the nearly identical Highland Park. In 2020 Highland Park had a population of 30,176 of which 24,825 were white.³ This quaint and unassuming suburb which looks like nearly every other in the country, is the hometown of Robert “Bobby” E. Crimo III, a white rapper who goes by the stage name “Awake.” On July 4th 2022 Crimo opened fire on the Highland Park fourth of July Parade killing six people and injuring forty-eight. His Discord channel, a social media platform which gained popularity in the pandemic, revealed rambling and incoherent hate speech, deep praise for Donald Trump, and a picture of Crimo draped in the American flag. Highland Mayor Nancy Rotering revealed in a statement on the tragedy that she actually knew Crimo growing up. Mayor Rotering was a Cub Scout leader for a local chapter of the Boy Scouts of America of which Crimo was a member. Upon realizing the connection Mayor Rotering asked of herself and us “What happened? How did somebody become this angry, this hateful, to then take it out on innocent people who, literally, were just having a family day out?” When asked what he was like back then, she replied, “He was just a little boy.”⁴

Crimo’s case is both horrifying and incredibly unremarkable in its familiarity. Young white men who become deeply wicked in the tepid stationary waters of white American isolationism. Mayor Rotering’s personal question is really a national one: what happened? And why does it keep happening?

I believe that white people in the United States have never really understood how deeply we oppress ourselves. I am not under the illusion that anyone is hunting us down as brutally as we have hunted, or even that the oppression we are selecting is of any equal caliber to that we have inflicted, but it is an oppression nonetheless, one which I believe we all recognize, understand, and refuse to name or face, for the great fear of what it would mean about the lives that we are living. In order to do the things that white people do, we have to be willing to give up a certain sense of our own humanity. It is our ability to remove the human in ourselves which enables us to remove it from everyone around us. There is an unspoken agreement shared between white people, a kind of deep and wicked gratitude that we are not the people who have had to bear our brutalities, thank God. Despite our impressive performance, we know what we did, and what we continue to do. And we know that we certainly could not handle it. We really do believe, some of us at least, that we are the chosen ones, and that what we have, this whiteness which we did not earn or work for, is something which everyone wants (though they don't), something which we must defend to the bone.

But what if *whiteness*, a word which we still don't really understand, what if this idea which we hold like water in the desert is actually our poison? What if the very thing which we have used to justify everything from the bread we eat to the God we praise, the thing which creates our entire sense of self, is the very thing that is destroying us? We have made some incredible sacrifices, committed to a substantially hollowed out form of living, in order to protect this word which supposedly gives us some kind of power, some kind of worth. And how could we not? Power, worth, wealth, these concepts which we feel and cannot hold are of incredible value in a country where real and substantial agency is becoming more and more rare among the common people. I believe that white people have no clue whatsoever what whiteness means, but

we know that we have it, that it makes us worthy of some respect we cannot afford anyone else, and that we are willing to give up everything to keep it: our health, our money, our families, our dignity, and what one might be so florid as to call, our souls. The question which white people are dealing with at the moment is a very simple one, one which we've been avoiding until we can't avoid it anymore: *is it worth it?*

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In their 2020 book “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism” economists, Anne Case and Angus Deaton unpacked the data around death trends in the United States. They wanted to unveil the declining conditions of living which unfettered capitalism produces. The data analysis showed that for the last twenty years, life expectancy for Black Americans and people of color has been increasing. It is still below the life expectancy of white Americans, but the gap is closing. For white Americans without a four year degree, life expectancy is declining. The primary causes of death contributing to these figures are suicide, alcoholism, and drug overdose, collectively known as “deaths of despair.” In addition, among white Americans without four year degrees, marriage rates have dropped to a record low, children born out of marriage have increased, and community memberships to groups like churches and unions have all but vanished.⁵

These numbers aren't unseen in American history. Some features of this decline share similarities with the figures surrounding quality of life among Black Americans during the 1970's and 1980s. When the globalized economy first started to boom, many jobs performed by working class Black Americans were outsourced to other countries. Wealthier Black Americans with advanced degrees left the city, and those who couldn't afford to were faced with increasing

rates of violence, drug abuse, and falling marriage rates, all largely based on the scarcity of work.⁵

What we are seeing is not something new, a tragedy with no history or basis. What we are seeing is that white people are not immune to the systems of oppression which we ourselves invented and uphold. We dismissed the personal and communal tragedies of global capitalism as necessary evils for the function of our economy, an economy which may be the very life force of that word *white* if it has one at all. We did not realize that in doing so we also agreed to be part of that machine, to be among the bodies it burns for fuel. Though we have the great honor of being its last victims, the hour is at hand, where yes, we too are its victims.

This comes as a great surprise when we gave up as much as we did in order to be last in line. The invention of the suburb, the censorship of American history, the formation of churches and facebook groups and grocery stores which are full of fonts and ingredients coded to mean white, all of these things we produced and sustained for the purpose of affirming our allegiance to American whiteness. All of these things indicated our whiteness to us and others by separating us from everybody else (including one another). The white American nuclear family is so cordoned from the rest of the world that they hardly know it exists beyond the evidence from television and TikTok. Our obsession with isolation, individualism, and a paranoia against community has created an unlivable cage around us. It is so miserable, and so insanity inducing that we must, we *must* commit to living in it, because the knowledge that there is a freedom from this and that we are electing not to get it would shatter our entire system of reality. White people are dying from a loneliness which we bought and paid for, and the price is going up.

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When Philosopher Hannah Arendt reported on the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann in 1961 for the *New Yorker*, she was struck by the ordinariness of the man responsible for one of the most incredible acts of evil in human history. Eichmann was, by Arendt's assessment, a rather plain bureaucrat, who participated in the roles and responsibilities of his position not out of any uniquely pronounced passion or commitment to the tenants of evil, but simply as a matter of course. Eichmann was a man who did his job, and did not ask many questions about what his job actually meant. Arendt believed that Eichmann's condition which allowed him to do what he did, was simply a grave inability to think, in her terms, his "thoughtlessness." She famously called this strange and terrifying ability to do unimaginable violence while *being* rather unremarkably passionate about violence "the banality of evil."⁶

The danger of white America's violence to ourselves is its total simplicity. We are born into a system of living, which when unquestioned, feels altogether normal and fairly comfortable. It takes an incredible feat of thought, to realize that one is living in a kind of prison at all. And one only begins to see it, when one gains the courage or the outside push to understand that what we take as a given, the humdrum day to day life of American whiteness is in fact incredibly sinister and potentially lethal. It requires the realization that perhaps the isolated way we raise our boys, the entitlement we take as a given, might have some kind of relationship to the fact that nearly all school-shooters in this country come from such unassuming white American families as our own. That despite what we might see in the media, the primary members of right wing conspiracy theory groups like Q Anon were not insane raging mountain men, but young white mothers between 20 and 35 who had an interest in essential oils and were quickly radicalized into anti-vaccination zealots.⁷

I believe that American whiteness is a unique kind of prison, coy and pernicious in its construction, cozy, and alluring, a kind of prison in which we are content to live and rot simply because we've been told that in this prison, we are the guards. It is true that our meals come more frequently, and we can eat it in the offices. But in the mild comfort of our position we have forgotten that we too are living in the prison. We are so gluttoned on the tokens and illusions of power that we have never walked outside the prison doors, have not seen the sun in who knows how long, have not lived beyond the walls we are defending to know what it is we are defending. Foucault and Lombardo could not design a more clever trap, as intricate or invisible as the one in which we live.

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The rising involuntary celibate or "incel" community, is something of an anthropological study into the prolonged consequences of a life inside of whiteness. Incels are men who for one reason or another feel deeply alone and ostracized from the rest of the world. They believe that they lack some specific qualities of a desirable man, and congregate online to bemoan the fact that their perceived lack means that women do not want to have sex with them. Incels meet almost exclusively on online forums without substantial content moderation or public facing scrutiny, platforms such as Reddit, Discord, and 4chan. They share violent and deeply misogynistic discourse which largely agrees that women should be punished for not sleeping with these men, who understand themselves as inferior to idealized American white masculinity, though they are nearly entirely white men, men who believe they are failing at being white men are supposed to be.

A defining moment which solidified this group's values and identity came in 2014 when Elliot Roger, a self identified incel went on a killing spree in Isla Vista, California. Elliot left behind a 137 page manifesto outlining his motives: "All I had ever wanted was to love women, but their behavior has only earned my hatred...I want to have sex with them, and make them feel good, but they would be disgusted at the prospect. They have no sexual attraction towards me." Rogers became a hero on incel forums, and inspired a series of violent acts of terrorism from incels which continue to this day. ⁸

There is a terrifying narrowness of the imagination among these men, who understand the failures and limits of our standards for beauty, romance, and love, but are unable to redefine those terms for themselves. Instead, embroiled in the misery of our own system of living, they enact violence onto women and minorities. These men believe that they are owed something, believe that they are being cheated of a right to desirability, to sex, and to power over others. I must believe that in addition these men are living in a state of isolation which has also prevented them from experiencing community, friendship, and familial love. I believe that these men do not even really want these things, or understand how they might alleviate their pain which becomes our pain.

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I suspect one of the reasons white people are unable to understand the extent to which we are not free, is because our whole lives we have been told that we are freedom's keepers. White people perhaps are made victims by our over-representation within the media.. Because we have always understood very deeply by way of film, books, television, and social media, what characters we are supposed to play, we have never considered becoming something or someone

beyond these scripts. There is a very specific outline of a person given to us, and we remain adamant about coloring ourselves within those lines.

If you are raised as a white man in the United States, such as I was and am, the ubiquity of figures like Clint East Wood, Clark Kent, Captain America, Ted Bundy, Popeye the Sailor Man, and European Jesus have created in your mind an incredibly narrow path upon which to reach the kind of man you can aspire to be. You do not know really, how to be someone beyond these characters or that other characters even exist. The feminine, the tender, the wise, and the mystical are, in your mind, props of what Simone Debuvoi would call, “objective reality.” They are tokens to be observed, decorations who’s observation testifies to the fact they are in the category of “other” and you are the “subject” the one who is in the position to observe.⁹ The existence of these “objects” these people who populate the margins of the stories, is simply a melodic counterpoint to which you might compare and confirm your own white masculinity. You know that you are the hero precisely because they are not. You do not ask whether or not these protagonists who look like you, these animated and animating brutes which you conjure in the mind are actually the kinds of people you want to be. Who wouldn’t want to be God and all his sons? But the consequences of being these kinds of men are rarely contested with. Even in fiction, these white men whom nearly all white men aspire to be are also incredibly tragic: men who are lonely, men who carry an Abrahamic righteousness, men who are stoic and unfeeling, men who must always be forgiven and can never forgive.

For a white boy with any kind of emotion (and surely, all of us have it before we learn to kill it), for a white boy at the age of fourteen or fifteen the question you are faced with is “Why am I failing to be this way? What profanity, what iron jaw, what posture and position, what act of

cruelty enacted toward myself or others will make me into this kind of man? And when can I perform it?”

The question is never “What will I have to give up to become that? *Do* I actually want to be this way?” and God forbid, “*why?*”

One of White America’s greatest sources of oppression is our own lack of imagination as to who and what we can be, our incredible inability to act outside the script of our fabricated identity. The routes and patterns of white values, aesthetics, and behaviors are uniquely pernicious in that they are rarely given name. “White behavior” is, to other white Americans, just *behavior*. We are unaware of the incredible specificity which governs our movement, dialogue, and relationships. And because we are unaware of the fact that it exists, we cannot then assess for ourselves whether or not this programming is something which helps or harms us. Even if it drives us to the ground, we cannot change behavior if we do not understand that behavior can be changed.

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The consequences of such conditioning, the hollowness of language and our obsession with vocabulary above action become more dangerously clear in the political arena. The republican Governor of Texas, Greg Abbot was put into hot water in February of 2021 when the Texas power grid failed in the middle of a freeze. Thousands of Texans were left without power, water, or heat. An estimated 224 people died. Abbott was among the leaders who for years had remained adamant that Texas maintain a power network separate from the rest of the country. The result was the largest failure in Texas infrastructure in the history of the state. Abbott’s historical failure put his position as Governor in serious trouble as his seat was up for election

the following year. In an attempt to maintain the allegiance of a working class white votership, one who was most devastated by Abbott's structural failures, the Governor produced a series of harmful and zealously partisan right wing initiatives to win over the white Americans he had just endangered. Four months after the Texas power grid failure, Abbot announced an elaborate action plan to build a border wall, arrest and jail migrants, and build an interstate compact between Texas and Arizona to police the border. The ACLU of Texas described his actions as "a clear attempt to distract from his governing failures while targeting vulnerable migrants." Abbott was reelected as Governor of Texas in November of 2022. ¹⁰

Despite physically harming hundreds of white Texans, devastating white homes and business, and not to mention gutting public health resources to deal with these tragedies, Abbott, was able to gain the trust and sympathy of white Texans by regurgitating the language of white values. This code, this language of care and allegiance, takes precedence in the imagination of white voters over the actual events of our lives. When wealthy powerful whites kill working class whites by devastating healthcare, education, nutrition, and infrastructure, they can still rely on the support of those victims by doubling down on whiteness, its lies and its violences. This fabricated identifier signals somehow that the killer and the killed are united, allegiant to each other, and co-conspirators against the mythologized evils of non-whites. Even if it kills us, white people will commit to the tenant of white supremacy because without that identity as evidence of superiority we would have nothing left. What gives us value if we don't have our whiteness? We would have to face the fact that we have alienated ourselves from the very people who have the knowledge, history, and tools to free us. That we need them more than they need us. We would rather die for our whiteness than admit it is killing us. We are honored to live in that prison, as long as we can be the guards.

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If we want to survive our own project, we are going to have to release ourselves of the very device to which we cling, to let go of the rope which ties us to the mountain of our lies. We are going to have to find freedom, after a thousand years of stomping it into the ground. We are going to have to contend with the fact that even though the word freedom is written across every dinner plate and number two pencil in this country, we the hostages of this country are not free. Even more, we are going to have to realize that we are the very ones who are keeping us imprisoned. We are going to have to ask for a forgiveness which we do not deserve, and for help from people who have no reason to help us.

I say all of this not as a reprimand, or a sermon which makes me holier than thou, but as a real and sincere gesture of love. I believe in the power and magnitude of our humanity. I have seen and witnessed the immensity of our loving, and as Audre Lorde says, “having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.”¹¹ I require of myself and my brothers and sisters, that we release ourselves of our own misery. Whiteness will never love white people. It will never set us free. As long as we keep burning everything we have upon that altar, we will keep becoming the morally and spiritually destitute creatures which we have always feared we are.

I believe we are worthy of our own humanity, a kind of mercy, a loving, a kindness which we have until this point treated as so readily disposable, as coins which we might trade for our darker wishes. I am here to say that the price is too high. That we have given everything we have to these promises, and they will never be fulfilled. I am challenging myself and everyone like me, to leave the illusion of security, and safety, because it is an illusion. And to instead build a

bond with the people we are so afraid of. To work for it, and earn it, as we have never had to earn anything before.

¹ Park Forest Historical Society, <https://www.parkforesthistor.org/america-on-the-move.html>

² “The Sprawling Metropolis” National Museum of American History
<https://www.parkforesthistor.org/america-on-the-move.html>

³ Illinois Demographics Summary, United States Census Bureau 2020
<https://www.illinois-demographics.com/highland-park-demographics#:~:text=Park%20Demographics%20Summary-,Population,people%20are%20right%20behind%20you.>

⁴ “Highland Park shooting person of interest left online trail of violent imagery” NBC News, Chicago, 2022.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/chicago-shooting-person-interest-left-online-trail-violent-imagery-rcna36628>

⁵ Case, Anne. Deaton, Angus “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism” Princeton University Press, 2020

⁶ Arendt, Hannah. “Eichman in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil ” Penguin Group, 2006

⁷ Meltzer, Malissa. “QAnon’s Unexpected Roots in New Age Spirituality” Washington Post 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/03/29/qanon-new-age-spirituality/>

⁸ Beauchamp, Zack. “Our Incel Problem” Vox Media, 2019
<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/4/16/18287446/incel-definition-reddit>

⁹ de Beauvoir, Simone “The Second Sex” Vintage Books, 1989

¹⁰ Ferman, Mitchell. “Gov. Greg Abbott touts Texas power grid’s readiness heading into fall, election season” The Texas Tribune, 2022
<https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/06/texas-abbott-grid-fall/>

¹¹ Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of the Erotic” Sister Outsider. Penguin Group 2020