

The Stories Whiteness Tells Itself

Racial Myths and Our American Narratives

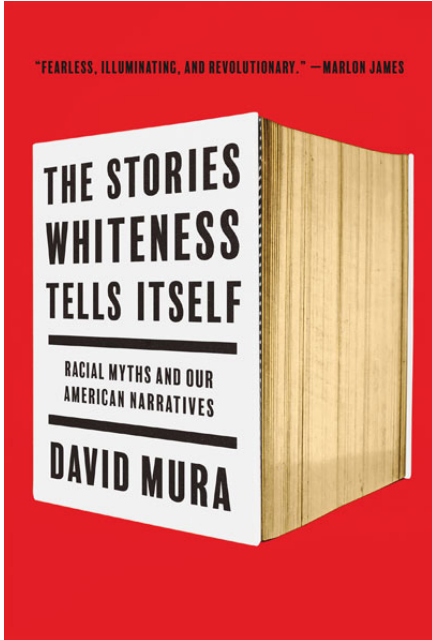
About the Book

The police murders of two Black men, Philando Castile and George Floyd, frame this searing exploration of the historical and fictional narratives that white America tells itself to justify and maintain white supremacy. From the country's founding through the summer of Black Lives Matter in 2020, David Mura unmasks how white stories about race attempt to erase the brutality of the past and underpin systemic racism in the present.

Intertwining history, literature, ethics, and the deeply personal, Mura looks back to foundational narratives of white supremacy (Jefferson's defense of slavery, Lincoln's frequently minimized racism, and the establishment of Jim Crow) to show how white identity is based on shared belief in the pernicious myths, false histories, and racially segregated fictions that allow whites to deny their culpability in past atrocities and current inequities. White supremacy always insists white knowledge is superior to Black knowledge, Mura argues, and this belief dismisses the truths embodied in Black narratives.

Mura turns to literature, comparing the white savior portrayal of the film *Amistad* to the novelization of its script by the Black novelist Alexis Pate, which focuses on its African protagonists; depictions of slavery in Faulkner and Morrison; and race's absence in the fiction of Jonathan Franzen and its inescapable presence in works by ZZ Packer, tracing the construction of Whiteness to willfully distorted portraits of race in America. In James Baldwin's essays, Mura finds a response to this racial distortion and a way for Blacks and other BIPOC people to heal from the wounds of racism.

Taking readers beyond apology, contrition, or sadness, Mura attends to the persistent trauma racism has exacted and lays bare how deeply we need to change our racial narratives—what white people must do—to dissolve the myth of Whiteness and fully acknowledge the stories and experiences of Black Americans.



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About the Author

David Mura is a poet, writer of creative nonfiction and fiction, critic, and playwright. He is author of *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing* and the memoirs *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* and *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity*. He is coeditor, with Carolyn Holbrook, of *We Are Meant to Rise: Voices for Justice from Minneapolis to the World* (Minnesota, 2021). He lives in Minneapolis.

"Reminds us that history is still just a story, and life and death lie in who gets to tell it and what's been told. Revolutionary."

—MARLON JAMES

"Pulls off the magic trick of taking an incredibly explosive issue and disarming it with such grace as to make elusive truths suddenly accessible."

—MAT JOHNSON

"Offers what so many white Americans claim they want: a rigorous education in perceiving themselves stripped of their dearest myths."

—DOUGLAS KEARNEY

Reading and Discussion Guide for *The Stories Whiteness Tells Itself*

Key Terms:

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge that distinguishes justified belief from opinion. Understanding epistemology can be especially useful in understanding the history and construction of race and racial narratives and terminology.

Ontology is the philosophical classification and explanation of entities and their relationships. Understanding ontology can help clarify how an entity cannot exist without a second entity. For example, Whiteness as it is constructed cannot exist without the existence of Blackness.

Systemic Racism (also frequently called structural racism) refers to the ways that societies perpetuate racial discrimination through connected social systems of housing, education, employment, wages, credit, media, health care, and criminal punishment. Structural practices reinforce discriminatory beliefs and values and determine how resources are distributed or withheld.

Introduction

1. How did David Mura's identity as a third-generation Japanese American shape how he learned about race? When did he begin to question the history of race in the United States? What practices, beliefs, and stories did you learn about white identity as a young person? What were you taught about Blackness? What have you learned about systemic racism?
2. How are voices of people of color systematically excluded from US history? How do attempts to rewrite or conceal the true legacy of racism maintain the racial status quo? How does debate about the validity of critical race theory and the 1619 Project maintain white supremacy? How can you practice critical examination of both our racial past and the present moment?

Part I: The Present Moment

The Killing of Philando Castile and the Negation of Black Innocence

3. What are some common reactions to Black narratives about state violence? How does the video of Philando Castile's murder—taken by his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds—demonstrate two different epistemologies (helping us clarify what is belief and what is opinion) of the same violent reality? Why is it important to understand the history of racial bias and racial ontology (the classification and explanation of racial terms) in the United States to contextualize Castile's murder?
4. How was Philando Castile burdened by racial profiling throughout his life? What are some of the psychological and emotional impacts of being targeted by the police? How were Castile's experiences with the police in conflict with his identity at work?

Black Lives Matter and the Social Contract

5. What is the social contract that Mura describes in this essay? How has the ontology (the relationship between entities) of the master/slave dichotomy contributed to relationships between the police and the Black community? Why is it critical to understand the connection between harmful views about Black people and the origins of slavery? How can these beliefs be deconstructed?
6. Why does Mura call for a new definition of racism? Are there any parts of this definition that feel challenging or less familiar to you? Is there anything you would add to his definition of racism?

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James Baldwin and the Repetitions of History: From the Harlem Riots to Ferguson, Baltimore, and BLM

7. How did James Baldwin's writing about the Harlem riots of 1943 connect individual emotional reactions to deeper systemic issues? How does systemic racism (the ways that society perpetuates racism through systems) impact the psychological and emotional health of a community? What are some of the harmful ways that white people react to Black rage or distrust?
8. How did the 2014 uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri reveal some of the impacts of systemic oppression and discrimination? What were Black residents forced to endure? What are some similarities between the Harlem riots, demonstrations in Ferguson, and 2015 protests in Baltimore?

Part II: How We Narrate the Past

White Memory and the Psychic Sherpa

9. How is the United States shaped by a systemic denial of its history? How is white memory treated differently from Black memory? Why do white people often utilize narratives of racial progress throughout US history? How do these narratives avoid the true history of race in the United States?
10. What is the psychic burden that many white people refuse to confront? How was the role of the psychic sherpa for white Americans constructed? Who is asked to play this role?

How We Think—or Don't Think—about It: Racial Epistemologies and Ontologies

11. What is the epistemology (what distinguishes justified belief from opinion) of race? How does the epistemology of race shape how knowledge is shared in the United States? How can a racist epistemology be dismantled?

“The epistemology of race: it shapes what we regard as valid and invalid knowledge; it shapes how we come to know and think about the world; it shapes how and whom we designate as possessing the truth of the world, both of the past and the present.” (page 80)

12. What is the ontology (the relationship between entities) of race? Why does the category of Whiteness require the category of Blackness? Do you agree with Afropessimism and the belief that the “ontology of slavery continues into the present and still structures our thinking and our perceptions of the differences between Whiteness and Blackness”? Why or why not?

“Ontology is the philosophical study of being or existence and the categories of being and their relations. This involves the questions of what entities can be said to exist and how those entities can be grouped and related in a hierarchy and categorized through similarities and differences.” (page 83)

Jefferson, the Enlightenment, and the Purposes of History

13. How did Thomas Jefferson defend and maintain the institution of slavery? Why is it important to acknowledge and critique Jefferson's thoughts on race and his practices as a slave owner? Why is chattel slavery rarely connected to the Founding Fathers? How does this impact how race and racism are discussed in the United States?
14. What are some of the present-day consequences of constructed historical mythologies? How will you respond when you encounter inaccurate or incomplete historical narratives? How can you deepen your understanding of less common histories of people of color in the United States?

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Black History: The Master/Slave Dialectic and the Signifying Monkey

15. How does the master/slave dialectic (investigating the truth of opinions) continue to shape present-day relationships between whites and Blacks? How does this dialectic reveal how ontology (the relationship between entities) creates epistemology (what distinguishes justified belief from opinion)? What are some of the ways that white people underestimate Black people and the complexities of Black consciousness?
16. What is the significance of the monkey in the oral poem about the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant (described on page 105)? How do current linguistic practices in the Black community draw from a historical power imbalance between white and Black people?

Whiteness in Storytelling: Amistad, the Film and the Novel

17. What are some of the major differences between the novel *Amistad* and the film? How do these differences illustrate different interpretations of America's racial past? How do these differences demonstrate different ontological meanings of Blackness and Whiteness?
18. How do the book and the film explore violence and power? Why must we identify and change the basic racial ontology (the relationship between entities) of our society in order to eliminate racially biased stories and histories? What types of power must shift in order to challenge the existing racial ontology and epistemology in the United States?

“Racial ontology and epistemology inform and shape the stories we tell; they permit certain stories to be told and prevent others from being imagined or countenanced by white people.” (page 118)

Portraits of Slavery: Faulkner and Morrison

19. How did Faulkner fail to challenge the institution of slavery and the victimization and oppression of Black people in his writing? What is problematic about his framing of the flaws of white Southern characters as “tragic” and referring to slavery as a “curse” on the South?
20. How did Toni Morrison write about the violence of slavery? How is her approach distinctly different from Faulkner's? How did her use of memory and the paranormal as literary devices in *Beloved* reveal the consciousness and humanity of her Black characters?

Lincoln Was a Great American, Lincoln Was a Racist

21. What were you taught about Abraham Lincoln? Were you familiar with his racist views prior to reading this essay? Why is Lincoln frequently elevated as a moral ideal? Do you find any difficulty in identifying Lincoln as a racist?
22. How does Whiteness set the terms and definitions of American history? How does viewing the past with moral relativism (which acknowledges that there are no absolute rules to determine whether something is right or wrong) shape how present-day racism is acknowledged and discussed? How is this further complicated by moral blindness? Does Whiteness always define America?

Racial Regression: Trump, Obama, and the Legacy of Reconstruction

23. How was white supremacy maintained and reestablished following the Civil War? What was the new myth of the South that emerged during Reconstruction (the era following the Civil War and the effort to reintegrate southern states and newly freed Black people into the United States)? Why did this narrative require a new ontology (the relationship between entities) defining Whiteness and Blackness? What legal and political strategies helped to expand white supremacy?

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24. How has a history of racism supported the economic interests and political power of white people today? What is significant about white people becoming a racial minority in the United States in 2040?

The Contemporary White Literary Imagination

25. Why do white fiction writers often fail to identify the racial identity of their white characters? Why does Mura assert that white writers are taking a political position when avoiding writing about the race of their characters? Do you agree?
26. How does the invisibility of Whiteness allow white writers to ignore their role in creating racial disparities and injustices? As a reader, how can you support and encourage writing about race and racism?

Racial Absence and Racial Presence in Jonathan Franzen and ZZ Packer

27. How do white American novelists uphold the rules of white identity in US society? Why does Mura focus this essay on Jonathan Franzen? What epistemological (what distinguishes justified belief from opinion) position does Franzen take when he refuses to write about race? Why is racial absence harmful?
28. How does ZZ Packer instruct readers to understand her characters through the lens of race? How does she include race without directly articulating it in her short story?

Psychotherapy and a New National Narrative

29. Who constructs a national narrative? How is the construction of an individual narrative similar to the construction of a national narrative? Why is it important that national narratives include painful and difficult truths? How could the individual process of building a new narrative, as described in the dialogue between Coetzee and Kurtz, inspire the creation of a new national narrative?
30. How is denial and repression embedded in US history? How might the United States undertake a truth and reconciliation process like the tribunals that took place in South Africa? What other steps could move Americans toward a more truthful narrative?

Part III: Where Do We Go From Here?

Questions of Identity

31. How was Mura's essay "Strangers in the Village" a defense of Baldwin's politics? Why is it important to chart our internal racial geographies? How can Baldwin's work serve as a map for understanding racism? What can his work teach us about the impact of racism on our souls and psyches?
32. What is your own vision for a new national narrative? How can this narrative be constructed while including diverse perspectives and a truthful evaluation of US history? What are some of the psychic comforts and reassurances that accompany white identity? Why are the ontology (the relationship between entities) and epistemology (what distinguishes justified belief from opinion) of Whiteness the hardest concepts to penetrate and change?

James Baldwin: I Am Not Your Negro

33. How did James Baldwin manage the rage and bitterness he experienced living in a racist society? Why did he seek out spiritual recovery? What realization did he have about white Americans and their view of American society?
34. How does the disease of racism impact Black Americans? What did you learn from the stories of Erica Garner, Kiese Laymon, and Ernest Owens? How does Mura instruct people of color to protect themselves from the harmful impacts of a racist society?

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Abandoning Whiteness

35. What path does Mura offer for a white person to engage in a journey of racial transformation? How might you either engage in this journey yourself, or encourage white people in your life to take some of these steps? Which step do you think will elicit resistance? How can you prepare for or counteract this resistance—either in yourself or in other people?
36. What is the relationship between Whiteness, shame, and ignorance? What connections exist between Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief (see page 255) and the construction of a new white identity?

“I Can’t Breathe”

37. How are recent murders of Black people by the police and white vigilantes connected to a legacy of violence and a history of whites terrorizing Blacks? How can the internal racist programming underneath this violence be deconstructed?
38. How did you initially react when you learned about the murder of George Floyd? How did you respond to the uprisings that followed? What is your individual stake in the movement for racial equity and social change? What skills, resources, or relationships can help you engage more deeply in this movement?

Coda: Daunte Wright

39. How does the murder of Daunte Wright illustrate how America devalues Black lives? Have similar incidents of murders of Black people happened in your community? What consequences should officers who shoot and kill Black people face?
40. Reflect on Mura's central question, “Why doesn't America value Black lives?” How did he explore this question throughout *The Stories Whiteness Tells Itself*?

Appendix: A Brief Guide to Structural Racism

White Assumptions: The Current Epistemology of White Supremacy

41. What are some of the assumptions that hide and deny racial bias and the existence of racism and racist practices? How do these assumptions anchor the ideology of Whiteness?
42. What are some of the epistemological (what distinguishes justified belief from opinion) rules that are used to enforce white supremacy? Have you ever declared your refusal to submit to these definitions and rules? How have you witnessed camouflage and denial in relationship to race? What is your role in working to shift the rules that construct and protect systemic racism?

About this Guide's Author

Rachael Zafer is a writer, educator, and social change consultant. Rachael provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. She is the author of discussion guides for thirty books, available for free download and use at at www.rachaelzafer.com.