How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live? How do they discuss it when alone among themselves? I think this question can be answered in a single sentence. A friend of mine who ran an elevator once told me:

"Land, man! Ef it wasn't for them policies 'n' them ol' lynch-mobs, there wouldn't be nothin' but.up own down here!"

Constructing Race, Creating White Privilege

Pem Davidson Buck

Constructing Race

Improbable as it may seem, since Americans live in a society where racial characterization and self-definition appear to be parts of nature, in the early days of colonization before slavery was solidified and clearly distinguished from other forms of forced labor, Europeans and Africans seem not to have seen their physical differences in that way. 1 It took until the end of the 1700s for ideas about race to develop until they resembled those we live with today. Before Bacon's Rebellion, African and European indentured servants made love with each other, married each other, ran away with each other, lived as neighbors, liked or disliked each other according to individual personality. Sometimes they died or were punished together for resisting or revolting. And masters had to free both Europeans and Africans if they survived to the end of their indentures. Likewise, Europeans initially did not place all Native Americans in a single racial category. They saw cultural, not biological, differences among Native Americans as distinguishing one tribe from another and from themselves.

Given the tendency of slaves, servants, and landless free Europeans and Africans to cooperate in rebellion, the elite had to "teach Whites the value of whiteness" in order to divide and rule their labor force.2 After Bacon's Rebellion they utilized their domination of colonial legislatures that made laws and of courts that administered them, gradually building a racial strategy based on the earlier

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tightening and lengthening of African indenture. Part of this process was tighter control of voting. Free property-owning blacks, mulattoes, and Native Americans, all identified as "of European ancestry," were denied the vote in 1723.

To keep the racial categories separate, a 1693 law increased the punishment of European women who married African or Indian men; toward the end of the 1600s, a white woman could be whipped or enslaved for marrying a Black. Eventually enslavement for white women was abolished because it transgressed the definition of slavery as black. The problem of what to do with white women's "black" children was eventually partially solved by the control of white women's reproduction to prevent the existence of such children. The potentially "white" children of black women were defined out of existence; they were "black" and shifted from serving a thirty-year indenture to being slaves. To facilitate these reproductive distinctions and to discourage the intimacy that can lead to solidarity and revolt, laws were passed requiring separate quarters for black and white laborers. Kathleen Brown points out that the control of women's bodies thus became critical to the maintenance of whiteness and to the production of slaves. At the same time black men were denied the right of colonial masculinity as property ownership, law, and access to white women were forbidden. Children were made to inherit their mother's status, freeing European fathers from any vestiges of responsibility for their offspring born to indentured or enslaved African mothers. This legal shift had a profound effect on the distribution of wealth in the United States ever since slaveholding fathers were some of the richest men in the country, and their wealth, distributed among all their children, would have created a significant wealthy black segment of the population.

At the same time a changing pattern of specific laws molded European behavior into patterns that made slave revolt and resistance unity more and more difficult. These laws limited, for instance, the European right to teach slaves to read. Europeans couldn't use slaves in skilled jobs, which were reserved for Europeans. Europeans had to administer prescribed punishment for slave "molasses" and were expected to participate in paroling at night. They did not have the legal right to befriend Blacks. A white servant who ran away with a Black was subject to additional punishment beyond that for simply running away. European rights to free their slaves were also curtailed. Built into all this, rarely mentioned but nevertheless basic to the elite's ability to create and maintain whiteness, slavery, and exploitation, was the use of force against both Blacks and Whites. Fear kept many Whites from challenging, or even questioning, the system. It is worth quoting Leonce Bennett's analysis of how the differentiation between black and white was accomplished.

The whole system of separation and subordination rested on official state terror. The expectations of the situation required men to kill some able people to keep them white and to kill many blacks to keep them black. In the North and South, men and women were murdered, tortured, and murdered in a comprehensive campaign of mass conditioning. The severe beating of black and white rebels was impaled on poles
along the road as warnings to black people and white people, and opponents of the status quo were stared to death in chains and tossed slowly over open fire. Some rebels were hanged; others were castrated. This exemplary cruelty, which was carried out as a deliberate process of mass education, was an inherent part of the new system.8

Creating White Privilege

White privileges were established. The "daily exercise of white personal power over black individuals had become a cherished aspect of Southern culture," a critically important part of getting Whites to "settle for being white." Privilege encouraged Whites to identify with the big slaveholding planters as members of the same "race." They were led to act on the belief that all Whites had an equal interest in the maintenance of whiteness and white privilege, and that it was the elite—those controlling the economic system, the political system, and the judicial system—who ultimately protected the benefits of being white.8

More pain could be inflicted on Blacks than on Whites.8 Whites alone could bear arms. Whites alone had the right of self-defense. White servants could own livestock; Africans couldn't. It became illegal to whip naked Whites. Whites but not Africans had to be given their freedom dues at the end of their indenture. Whites were given the right to bear any Blacks, even those they didn't own, for showing proper respect. Only Whites could be hired to force black labor as overseers. White servants and laborers were given lighter tasks and a monarch, for a time, on skilled jobs. White men were given the right to control "their" women without elite interference. Blacks as slaves were denied the right to family at all, since family would mean that slave husbands, not owners, controlled slave wives. In 1669, all free African women were defined as labor, for whom husbands or employers had to pay a tithe, while white women were defined as keepers of men's homes, not as labor, their husbands paid no tax on them. White women were ridiculed given control of black slaves and the right to substitute slave labor for their own labor in the fields.

Despite these privileges, landless Whites, some of them living in "miserable huts," might have rejected white privilege if they saw that in fact it made little positive difference in their lives, and instead merely protected them from the worst negative effects of elite punishment and interference, such as were inflicted on those of African descent.8 After all, the right to whip someone doesn't cure your own hunger or landlessness. By the end of the Revolutionary War amnesty was in the air. Direct control by the elite was no longer politically or militarily feasible. Rebellions and attempted rebellions had been fairly frequent in the hundred years following Bacon's Rebellion.8 They indicated the contriving depth of landless European discontent. Baptist ferment against the belief in the inherent superiority of the upper classes simply underscored the danger.8

So landless Europeans had to be given some material reasons to reject these aspects of their lives that made them similar to Black Africans and Native Americans, and to focus instead on their similarity to the landed Europeans—to
accept whiteness as their defining characteristic. Landless Europeans' only real similarity to the elite was their European ancestry itself, so that insects had to be...