

# Words and Pictures

**WHITENESS** HAS BEEN A DEFINING PART OF OUR CULTURE for hundreds of years. We have embedded the idea that white people are good and people of color are bad and dangerous into our everyday language. Most words containing "black" have negative meanings (there are nearly 90 of them), while those containing "white" have positive meanings. Looking more deeply at our words and their current meanings, we can find hundreds that imply people of color and people of different cultures and ethnicities are dangerous, threatening, manipulative, dishonest, or immoral. In fact, anything foreign or alien has connotations of being not white, not pure, not American, and not Christian. We reinforce racism every time we use such language.

My goal in the following exercise is not to enforce some kind of political correctness. We are trying to understand how racism becomes embedded in our culture, our language, the way we see the world. And we are trying to develop ways of talking with each other that are respectful and that counter historical patterns of exploitation and domination.

Each of the following words and phrases contains a derogatory racial meaning in its definition or derivation, or puts a comparatively positive spin on whiteness, white people, or white culture. Can you list an alternative, racially neutral word you could use in its place?

## LIST OF RACIALLY CHARGED WORDS

- |                               |                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| black deed                    | black hearted  |
| blacklist                     | blackmail      |
| black market                  | black sheep    |
| white lie                     | white knight   |
| white hope                    | black magic    |
| dark (as in dark day)         | Dark Ages      |
| to gyp (from gypsy)           | alien          |
| yellow peril                  | red menace     |
| to scalp                      | to Jew down    |
| Jew's harp                    | yellow bellied |
| war paint                     |                |
| (referring to women's makeup) | Indian giver   |

- |                     |                    |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| black mark          | black flag         |
| white wedding       | white flag         |
| whitewash           | pure/white as snow |
| that's white of you | the dark side      |
| to be in the dark   | to be dim-witted   |
| wampum              | terrorist          |
| gypsy blood         | macho              |
| barrio              | manana             |
| tribe               | tribal warfare     |
| natives             | peace pipe         |
| Indian giver        | smoke signals      |
| feather in your cap | on the warpath     |
| banana republic     | china doll         |
| Chinese fire drill  | far east           |
| near east           | middle east        |
| dark continent      | old world          |
| third world         |                    |

What other words or phrases can you think of that are racially derogatory?

*\* I don't report this with you*

Racially demeaning usage also needs to be challenged in our visual images. When the good guys wear white hats and ride white horses and the bad guys wear black, the same racially tainted values are passed on. Advertisements, movies, and TV images rely on the development of images of darkness to convey danger and to provoke white fear. One recent example is the Disney movie The Iron King. Throughout the movie, lightness is associated with good, darkness with evil. Everything from the lightness or darkness of the manes of the lions, the colorings of different animals, the sunshine in the lions' kingdom versus the murky land of the hyenas, reflects the racial and moral hierarchy of the film. This is reinforced by the language of the characters: the lions talk in middle-class "white" English and the hyenas in a more colloquial street dialect. These racial, color-coded values can be found consistently in Disney movies going back to Sleeping Beauty and Dumbo (remember the crows) and introduce young children to our racial hierarchy in a way that seems natural and unremarkable (or at least is not remarked upon by adults).

What films have you seen where the use of images of white and black, light and dark, or the racial casting of the heroes and villains was used to reinforce white = good and dark = bad?

If we pay attention to the images around us we will notice the pervasive influence that racism has on our everyday lives. Racial difference and racial hierarchy, like gender hierarchy, are built into our spiritual values, our national identity, our language, our visual imagery, and our sense of who we are. So far we have looked at whiteness as a general social construct. Before going into more detail about how whiteness works in our lives,