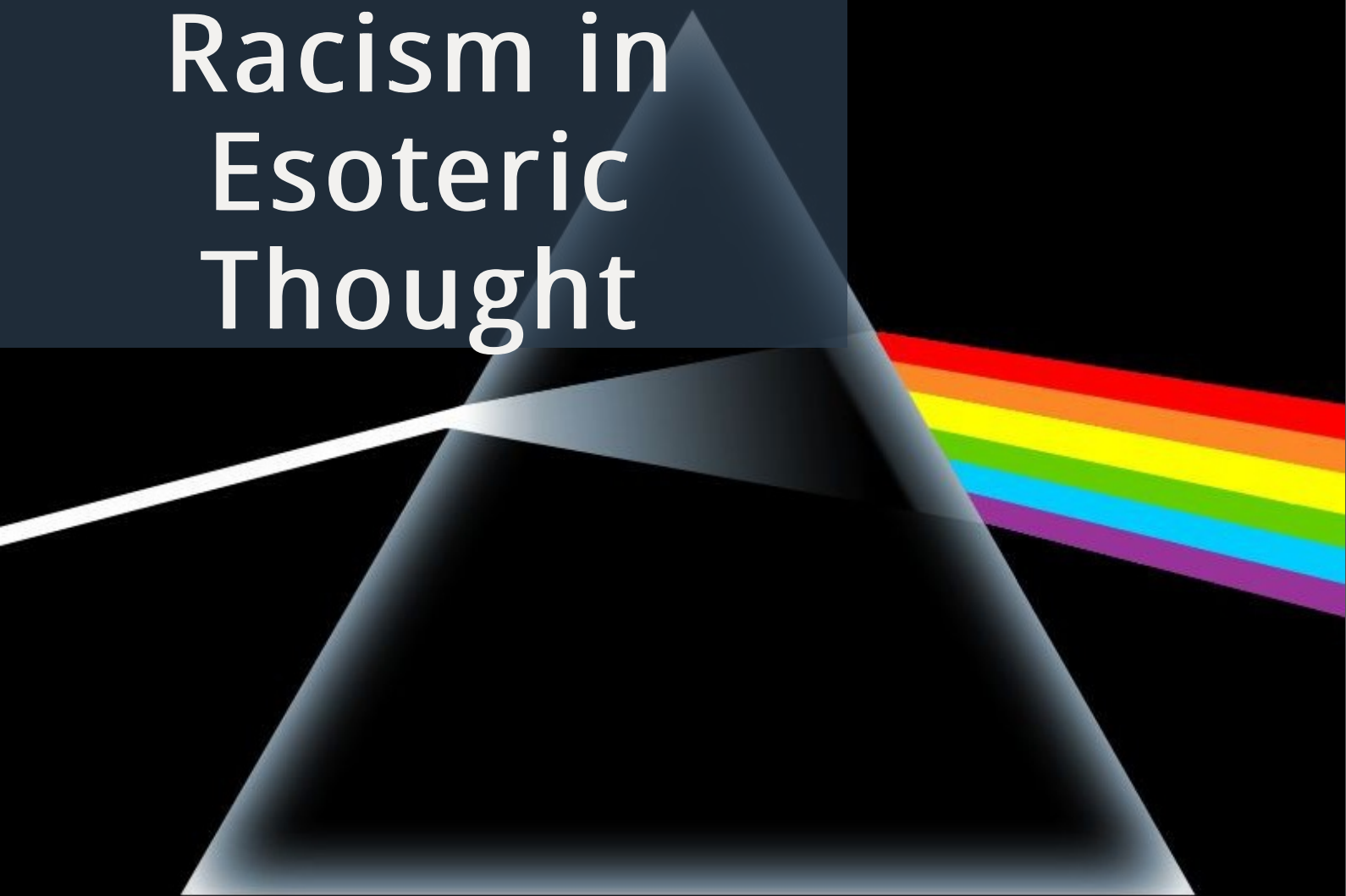


# White Light, Black Magic: Racism in Esoteric Thought



Brandy Williams

# White Light, Black Magic: Racism in Esoteric Thought

“Quit the night and seek the day!” The clarion call summons the Golden Dawn Neophyte to join the company of initiates. This bold proclamation encapsulates all that is noble about the pursuit of magic. The seeker walks in the white light of the sun, bearing secret knowledge, fiercely opposing the black shadow of profane ignorance.

Dark and light. Black and white. They’re used interchangeably to identify positive and negative magic and the people who wield them. White magic heals and protects, black magic curses and compels. The white magician is dedicated to magic helping humanity. Consciously or unintentionally the self-centered black magician causes harm.

White and black are not just magical terms. They are also terms that describe “races,” distinguishing people of European heritage from people of African heritage. There are white people and black people. Are white magicians physically white? Are black magicians dark of skin? Of course not! White and black don’t describe magical skin color. These color words are just a symbolic way to mark good and evil, they have no relationship to the physical world. Any offense is inadvertent, unintentional, an unfortunate coincidence of esoteric and political terms.

We would like to think so. However painful it may be to acknowledge, our noble aspiration slots seamlessly into the invisible groove of ancient prejudice. The linkage of *white* to *light* to *sacred* developed in the context of the justification of slavery, and specifically the white enslavement of black people. When we read that the Great White Brotherhood stands against the falsity of Black Brothers this isn’t just a cringe-worthy accident of an older language. It is a living example of intentional and explicit white supremacy. It is exactly as racist as it appears to be.

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## White Light

Light has been a Western metaphor for knowledge and spiritual aspiration since Philo married Hellenic and Hebraic thought. But when did light become white?

Is “white” the color of the sun? In modern terms our home star is classified as a G2 on the spectral scale, a dwarf yellow star. That’s the scientific response. Ask a child “what color is the sun” and you are likely to get the same response: “yellow!” Depending on the atmosphere the sun in the sky looks yellow or orange or red to the human eye. If it’s not the color of the sun, why do we call light white?

Light is white because Robert Boyle said it is.

There are so many stories that can be told about this singularly influential man. The history of science cherry-picks Boyle’s observations about light and color and ignores his alchemy, Christianity, and imperialism. Limiting ourselves to the biography of a pioneering scientist obscures the complexity of Boyle’s life and thought. He was a scientist, a chemist and physicist, but he was also a theologian who mixed science and religion.

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## The Scientist

The history of Western science presents a biography that looks something like this. Robert Boyle helped to develop the scientific method. In 1660 Boyle joined with ten colleagues and founded The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, the earliest European scientific organization. He published his great work on light in 1664. “Experiments and Considerations Touching Color” challenged the received wisdom of Aristotle which had strangled inquiry in Europe for centuries. Instead Boyle proposed to hold a mirror to the world and investigate it directly.

Boyle offered three distinct methods for investigation. The first was chemical experiments. In Boyle’s day, chemists compounded the dyes used for clothing as well as pigments used by artists, making color a natural area of interest. The second method was optical experiments. Boyle suggested that color is not a quality in itself, but is instead the result of light registering on the retina. The third method involved collecting reports from colleagues around the world, that is, observations provided by expert witnesses.

Each of these three methods – chemistry, physics, and expert observation – gathered information about color. However, Boyle meant to do more than add to the knowledge of a specific subject. He meant to establish a new way of understanding the world. European science would no longer rely on the wisdom of the ancients, but would move forward to explore the processes of nature on its own initiative.

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In Part II of “Considerations” Boyle wrote “Of the Nature of Whiteness and Blackness.” Aristotle had attributed the whiteness of objects to smoothness and the blackness of objects to “asperity” or roughness. Boyle noted that white surfaces are quite bright – for example, snow can blind a traveler. He conjectured that white surfaces have little bumps on them which direct light outward away from the object toward the eyes.

Boyle observed that the sun looks yellow or red to the naked eye. He could look at the sun directly when clouds obscured it, or the sun was reflected in the mirror of water, or during an eclipse. When looked at directly, the sun and “any other lucid body” dazzles the eyes. At those times, he said, “if any colour be to be ascribed to them it should be whiteness.” Texture makes a body white, and texture also makes a body black, “whereby it does as it were Dead the Light that falls on it, so that very little is Reflected Outwards to the Eye.”

Furthermore, Boyle found that black absorbs not only light but also heat. He reported that when he wore a black glove in sunlight his hand became warmer than when he wore a white glove.

Boyle’s discoveries inspired a younger colleague. In 1672 Isaac Newton joined the Royal Society. In 1704 he published the first version of *Opticks*, a report of his experiments with prisms. He reported that sunlight directed through a prism refracted into a rainbow of colors: red, yellow, orange, green, blue and violet. Others had made this observation, but he took this a step further and put that rainbow through another prism, merging it back into light.

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The experiments and observations of Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton established light as the source of color. White surfaces reflect light and heat, black surfaces absorb them. Also, sunlight when refracted proves to contain the colors of the visible spectrum.

Boyle and Newton together laid the framework for the Western scientific understanding of color and light. In doing so they helped to spark the scientific revolution and establish the empirical techniques by which scientists acquire new knowledge.

## The Alchemist

Although the history of science claims Robert Boyle as a physicist and a chemist, he understood himself to be a natural philosopher and an alchemist. In “Experiments and Considerations Touching Color” Boyle described what happened when he put distilled mercury in a cucurbite and applied heat: mercury drops adhered to the alembic giving the glass a white appearance.

“Cucurbite” and “alembic” are terms describing alchemical apparatuses. In fact “Experiments” turns out to be a Hermetic tract addressed to a hypothetical student, “Pyrophilus,” lover of light. Modern philosophers, Boyle told Pyrophilus, derived colors from a “Mixture of Light and Darkness, or rather Light and Shadows.”

In “Experiment in Consort, Touching Whiteness and Blackness,” Boyle explored whiteness and blackness as qualities. Whiteness is not just an artifact of reflectivity, whiteness has physicality. He reported on his investigation into numerous substances to see if their powders could be rendered white: silver, tin, antimony, “the Red Solution of Sulphur.” He concluded, “most Praecipitated Bodyes are White.”

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Boyle explored white and black together, “those two Qualities being Contrary enough to Illustrate each other.” He noted that “a Body that is not White, may be made White,” and the contrary is true, “a White Body may be Depriv’d of its Whiteness.” He reported that a silver dye rubbed on the skin darkened it – that is, a black substance turned white skin black, the black didn’t wash off, and it took some days to wear off. As an example of the opposite, going from black to white, Boyle offered that dark clothes could be made lighter by the addition of substances which changed the texture of the color.

Boyle’s colleague Isaac Newton shared his love for natural philosophy. He locked himself in his study for days on end running alchemical operations. He wrote a million words on alchemy which went unpublished until very recently because the Royal Society deemed them unfit to print.

As a natural philosopher Newton thought in terms of seven planets and believed the visible spectrum to embody the music of the spheres. The prism spectrum showed six colors, red, yellow, orange, green, blue and violet. Newton needed seven colors to make the planetary system work, so he interposed the color “indigo” between blue and violet, then assigned musical notes to each color.

Newton closed the spectrum into a circle to enhance the impression of a musical octave. He brought red together with violet. This red-to-violet loop does not occur in nature; a circular rainbow presents the colors in a concentric series, from red on the outside to violet on the inside. It was not observation but rather natural philosophy that inspired Newton to create the color wheel. Natural philosophy also inspired Newton to recombine the prismatic rainbow back into the original light, an example of the process *solve et coagula*, separate and combine.

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Influenced by Boyle's work, Newton placed white at the center of his color wheel, and ranked the colors of the prism according to their "distance from Whiteness." Newton adopted Boyle's use of white as standard, designating white as the "chiefest color."

Our understanding of the philosophies of Newton and Boyle are limited due to the scientific suppression of the alchemical perspective which deprives us of insight into the way that Boyle and Newton understood color, including white and black. Reading their works directly allows us to engage with their discoveries and recover the Hermetic perspective on color.

## The Imperialist

Boyle's England was the England of empire. England planted colonies on lands around the globe, killed or enslaved the native inhabitants, then imported African slaves to farm those colonies. European landowners enjoyed the fruits of the vast wealth created by this dual theft of land and labor.

England entered the slave trade in 1663, the year before Boyle published his treatise on colors. Boyle was embedded in the empire-building effort. Charles II appointed Boyle as one of the directors of the East India Company, a post which he held for many years.

As we have seen, Boyle's new scientific methodology included three procedures: chemical experiments, optical experiments, and observations made by credible witnesses. The observations are collected in "The eleventh Experiment, about the Blackness of the Skin, and Hair of Negroes, and Inhabitants of Hot Climates." Boyle collected stories from correspondents around the empire, including slave owners in the West Indies.



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These stories focused on the color of black people. Do black people who are forcibly relocated to colder climates stay black? Are their babies born black? Boyle's correspondents reported coolly that when black bodies were dissected they were found to be white under the skin. Boyle concluded "the Seat of that Colour seems to be but the thin Epidermes, or outward Skin."

Boyle assumed the standard person is white. African peoples had experienced a "discolouring." What caused that discoloring? Was it the heat of the African sun? After all the skin of people who worked outdoors turned darker. Still, black children remained black wherever they were born. Children born to black people brought from Africa a hundred years earlier were still black. White people in Africa might experience sunburn, but their children were still born white. He concluded that the "Principal Cause" of blackness in African people "is some Peculiar and Seminal Impression." In other words, black semen causes black babies.

The material in experiment eleven stands out from the other experiments. Boyle shifted away from examining white as the result of surface reflectivity toward considering skin color as if it is a surface that can be examined like any other. But skin color has significant variations, and white and black are not particularly descriptive of these. Boyle's use of the term white in this context was not so much scientific as it was an apologetic for empire.

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The England of empire was also the England of a revolution in human rights. John Locke's *Two Treatises Concerning Government* made the radical claim that government must protect life, liberty and property, and that people may legitimately overturn government which violates individual rights. These ideas were applied in action in the American and French Revolutions. Locke's writing and thought formed the nucleus of the American experiment in democracy and freedom. He helped to start the Enlightenment movement valuing individual rights and scientific thought over religious dogma and monarchy.

It would be reasonable to expect that this champion of human rights would oppose slavery. Sadly, he worked instead to justify slavery. He was involved in the English institutions establishing colonies in America. He sat on trade boards. He himself invested in the slave trade. He helped to write the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, where he said "every freeman in Carolina, shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves." Crucially, this applied even those who had converted to Christianity.

Locke was also a natural philosopher and member of the Royal Society. Robert Boyle was his mentor and he assisted Boyle in his some of experiments. He adopted some of Boyle's ideas, notably his focus on whiteness. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) Locke applied the quality of whiteness to the human mind. Like white bodies which reflect light, white minds are rational, and black minds are not. Locke concluded, "...the child can demonstrate to you *a Negro is not a man*, because white colour was one of the constant simple ideas of the complex idea he calls *man*."

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Locke, Newton and Boyle together formed the core ideas of the Western scientific revolution. In science and in public policy they promoted the idea that whiteness gave Europeans the reason which allowed them to found the world's most advanced civilization, one which was completely free to utilize the resources of the natural world, including the less-than-human blacks they were justified to enslave.

## The Theologian

Some of Robert Boyle's biographers suggest that his primary interest in the East Indies Company was not economic but religious. Boyle was an Anglican theologian committed to the cause of converting the world to Protestantism. He dedicated a significant amount of time and money to this; he financed missionary expeditions, and he had the New Testament translated into numerous languages with his own funds.

Today we think of science and religion as incompatible. Boyle definitively rejected knowledge founded on revelation, an important step in the separation of religion and science. However, Boyle found that his observations did not challenge his religious faith, they deepened that faith. In 1690, the year before his death, he published the theological tract "The Christian virtuoso, shewing that by being addicted to experimental philosophy, a man is rather assisted than indisposed to be a good Christian."

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*The Christian Virtuoso* established the foundation for natural theology, the Christian response to the challenge of science. Boyle used the metaphor of a clock to describe the universe. The virtuoso or scientist investigates the mechanical workings of the clock. This uniquely positions the virtuoso to appreciate the workmanship of God who created the universe and laid down its laws. Rather than proving God's existence by faith, natural theology proves God's existence by reason; such an intricate mechanism could only have been created by an intelligence.

Boyle drew on Biblical teachings in his exploration of whiteness and blackness. He believed that all human beings are descended from Adam and Eve. This would make all human beings members of the same race. But then why were some people black?

Could blackness be attributed to the Biblical curse of Ham? Genesis 9:20-27 gives the story. Noah's son Ham saw his drunken father passed out naked in his bed. Ham sniggered about this to his brothers – go look at him! Instead of joining in the mockery, the good brothers politely backed into Noah's tent so that they could not see him, then covered him with a blanket, preserving his modesty along with their own virtue. When Noah woke, the good brothers told their father what Ham had done. Enraged at Ham's disrespect, Noah cursed Ham's children to serve the children of the good brothers. Genesis 10:6 lists the "children of Ham." These are not people, but lands: Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya and Canaan.

Evaluating this story, Boyle opined that Noah did not curse the children of Ham to be *black*, he cursed them to be *servants*. Boyle was comfortable with servitude. In fact, enslaving Africans offered an excellent opportunity to convert heathens to Christianity. Bringing African people out of the darkness of ignorance into the light of European religion improved their lot and saved their souls. It was the most noble reason to engage in the slave trade.

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These concepts are still in use today. William Escribge notes that Protestant churches used the cursed race doctrine to call for the secession of southern states which caused the American civil war, and after the war to justify segregation policies. This same doctrine underwrote opposition to the civil rights act of 1964. Baptist minister Grady Caldwell (quoted by Joe Westbury) notes that the alt-right and white supremacy movements continue to cite the curse of Ham to elevate white skin color over black.

## Critiquing Boyle

Critics like Cristina Malcolmson, Ibram Kendi and Cynthia Levine-Rasky evaluate the ways scientists of the early modern period examined *skin* color alongside the *physics* of color.

Malcolmson traces the origins of scientific racism to the foundation of the Royal Society. Boyle's eleventh experiment paved the way for the idea that empirical evidence supports the superiority of European peoples over others. The Royal Society, Malcolmson says, preferred to collect "matters of fact" and let these suggest conclusions rather than beginning with a theory to prove or disprove. Boyle collected stories from Europeans and presented these as fact, "mirrors of nature," on the same basis as results of chemical and optical experiments. Malcolmson specifically calls out the limits to Boyle's skepticism – he did not question the Western European values which framed the observations of his informants. Boyle promises that he is reporting only what he sees, but does not recognize the way his own values affected what he saw.

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Boyle claimed to have presented the truth “clearly and faithfully,” ignoring his own opinions. Ibram Kendi clarifies that what Boyle actually did was to designate the opinions of his chosen witnesses as facts. Kendi concludes that Boyle’s attempt at objectivity slipped racism into the scientific method from its inception.

Cynthia Levine-Rasky offers the analysis that “whiteness” does not define a people but a relationship shaped by power. It is a position of social dominance which defines itself against the racialized other. Boyle’s investigation into whiteness comes into focus when read against this background. When Boyle presented the opinions of powerful European men as fact he helped establish the power structure which placed African slaves under European power.

## Boyle’s Impact

Crucially, the works of Robert Boyle provide material for both racist and anti-racist thought. He asserted that blackness is a quality of skin color and that all humans belong to one race, understandings we use today to dismantle racism.

On the other hand Boyle applied “white” and “black” to describe Europeans and Africans, and associated his discoveries about light with his assertions about people. White bodies reflect light, black bodies “dead” light. White is chief, central, original, and light; black is a discoloring of white and the absence of light. European people possess reason and true religion, black people are servants and candidates for religious conversion.

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Boyle leveraged alchemy to explain and justify the European domination of African people and their forced conversion to Christianity. He accomplished this through the value which he assigned to *whiteness*. For Boyle the Anglican alchemist, white was not only a quality but a material substance. Whiteness imbued the European people with beauty and a superiority blessed by God, while black Africans were an inferior people cursed by God to be the servants of Europeans.

“White light” became the standard phrase describing the colors of light. Even today Western scientists talk about the prism spectrum as an artifact of “white” light without interrogating the imperialism and the theology behind the idea. The critique that Boyle did not examine his own prejudices does not go far enough. Boyle actively centered whiteness. Of course he saw white when he looked at the sun. He saw white in everything of value.

## Esoteric Whiteness

The foundations of scientific racism are also the foundations of esoteric racism. While scholars of the early modern period and of slavery critique Boyle’s scientific and theological work, it is left to contemporary esotericists to unpack his impact on magick.

The fact that Boyle and Newton called the sun’s light “white” is an extraordinary departure from Hermetic thought. Boyle admitted that when he looked at the sun he saw yellow. Newton could not help but refer to the “yellowish Colour of the Sun’s Light.” For the ancients, the sun was *gold*. Everything golden belonged to the sun: amber, sunflowers, lions, hawks, the precious metal itself.

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Boyle's shift of light from "gold" to "white" established racism in esoteric language. The value of white, explicitly applied to European men, subsumed the spiritual importance of life-giving sunlight. It wasn't light but whiteness itself that was the highest good.

As soon as white was established as the positive source of life it was only a short step to designate black as the source of evil.



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## Black Magic

We have seen that “white” when applied to light designates a cultural idea that Europeans are superior to Africans. Does “black magic” have a similar root – is it referring to ritual practiced by the peoples of Africa?

When we use the word “magick” today the “white” is assumed – white magick is the norm. Black is used today to describe magic which has the intent or effect of harming others. The ideas “black” and “evil” are so closely linked that the terminology seems natural to use. But then why don’t we just say negative magic or harmful magic or selfish magic? Why do we call it *black*?

Our English word “magic” has a Greek origin. The Western Magical Tradition derives partly from the ancient Greek encounter with Egypt. Given that Egypt is part of Africa and populated with black people we would expect to see a positive value for black. In fact we do see this in ancient Egyptian religion where black is the color of the rich life-giving earth while the blazing sun presides over the realm of the dead. If any color is associated with evil in Kemetic religion it is the color red, the color of the god Seth and the desert he rules.

It was when Europeans enslaved Africans that black became evil.

## Graeco-Egyptian Magic

In the temples of Kemet, now Egypt (Misr in Arabic), priestesses and priests engaged in religious practices that we would now call magical. Deities were provided clothing, food and drink, and incense. Words were spoken and songs were sung to provide Egypt’s rulers safety and health and a secure afterlife. The enemies of Kemet and the gods of chaos were ritually bound and cursed.

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Priests and priestesses served for a few months each year and then rotated out of the temple. When they went back home they spoke words and sang songs for the prosperity of the fields and the health of their families and neighbors. Temple magic seeped out into the general populace.

Visitors from Greece picked up Egyptian magical practices and brought them back to the Hellenic world. Platonic philosophers studied in Egyptian temples and passed down the knowledge of how to heal, how invoke the gods for their spiritual counsel, how to handle the issues that come up in life. Both practical and spiritual practices were called theurgy, that is, the work of the gods. The women and men who practiced Greek philosophical and magical theurgy passed this Egyptian knowledge to their students.

While the magic of the Egyptian temple was mainstream, the Greek magician was always a bit suspect. Homer and Hesiod told stories of the goddess Circe with her potions and wand, and Medea who had the gift of prophecy and wielded potions to sicken and kill. For the Greeks, magic could be used to harm as well as heal.

When the later Roman emperors banned divination and sacrifice, Pagan practice moved definitively out of the religion column into the realm of forbidden practice. Christian authorities have battled persistent Pagan customs from that time to this. As the centuries went on European theologians and scholars sought to draw a clean line between religion, i.e. Christianity, and magic, that is, Pagan religion.

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By the nineteenth century European scholarship was vigorously denying that Egypt had anything to do with the development of Greek philosophy, however strongly the Greek philosophers themselves insisted they had travelled to Kemet to learn. Instead, Hellenic civilization had developed in splendid isolation, the pinnacle of human intellectual achievement and the cornerstone of white culture. Egyptian achievement could not be wished away, but it could be assimilated. The same scholastic fashion denied that Egypt was part of Africa and that Egyptians were black; “North Africa” was subsumed into “Mediterranean” culture, and Egyptians were declared mixed race, lighter skinned, whitish.

Theurgic magical practices of the Graeco-Egyptian line survived through medieval grimoires which called on spirits to accomplish both healing and harm. Christine Ammer notes that Christopher Marlowe called this the “black art” in *Doctor Faustus* in 1590. In European languages the descriptor “black” had begun to be attached to both “evil” and “magic.”

## Conjure

African religion re-entered the West through the slave trade. Imagine that you are a woman from an African tribe: Yoruba, Igbo. You have been kidnapped. Thrown into a ship and manacled, you managed to survive the passage to America. There you were sold like a bolt of cloth to a man who took you home and raped you. He worked you in the fields until you gave birth. When your daughter was old enough to work he took your daughter and sold her. What power would you have to take any kind of control back over your body, your work, your life?

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You could draw upon the religion of your ancestors and the knowledge of your tribe. You could work with roots and herbs. You could call on spirits. You could give your child a lock of your hair to connect her with you. She could pass the roots and herbs and spirits and hair on to her own children.

Yvonne Chireau documents the development of Conjure from the first arrival of slaves in America to the 1920s. The earliest recorded instances of ritual among enslaved Africans were charms made for self-protection. Africans in America carried their spiritual traditions everywhere they were taken, developing ritual practices of healing and cursing.

In 1931 Zora Neale Hurston noted that the European word for these practices is Veudeau (spelled today Voodoo or Voudou) but the African-American terms are Hoodoo, Conjure and roots. Hurston thought traditional knowledge remained strongest on island plantations where absentee white landlords imported entire families which remained intact and retained West African culture and language. Haitian and Dominican refugees fleeing to New Orleans brought these intact customs with them.

More recently Dr. Katrina Hazzard-Donald has described Hoodoo as the “indigenous, herbal, healing, and supernatural-controlling spiritual folk tradition of the African American in the United States”.

Western medicine owes an incalculable debt to the healing traditions of Africa and indigenous Americans. Rish de Terra points out that medieval European medicine had largely lost the knowledge of healing learned in Kemet. Medical science during the age of empire centered on the theory of the four humors, and the primary treatment for illness was bleeding. Only midwives retained the knowledge of herbal medicine that Greek philosophers had learned from Kemetic temple universities.

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Far from being ignorant heathens, African slaves brought substantial knowledge in addition to physical labor to American plantations. Sarah Mitchell notes that African practices shaped southern agriculture, music and food. In addition, slave healers offered an important alternative to the ineffective heroic measures favored by Europeans. African root workers used herbs and salves that were more effective than bleeding practices. African herbal knowledge along with Native herbal knowledge infused American medicine with effective remedies.

Enslaved Africans also used their knowledge of roots and herbs to poison slave masters as a form of self-defense. This sparked laws prohibiting the use of Conjure. Although the terms Hoodoo, Voodoo, root work and Conjure all include both healing and harming practices, they came to be used only to describe power exercised for baneful ends.

Remember that white slavers forcibly converted kidnapped Africans to Christianity. It was one of the justifications for slavery; “heathen” Africans received the “benefit” of true religion. Over time Christianity was assimilated into Conjure practice. Conjure accepted Christianity, but Christianity did not accept Conjure. In the 1870s clergy specifically attacked conjuring practices, labeling Conjure as a form of heathenism.

After Emancipation some African Americans rejected Conjure, distancing themselves from anything that reminded them of slavery. Both white and black reformers framed Conjure as superstition which could be dispelled by the education that black people had previously been denied.

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That education, centered on European scholarship, specifically denigrated Conjure. In 1871 E.B. Tylor's book *Primitive Culture* overtly connected magic with the idea of black and with African religion. Tylor clearly articulated the nineteenth century narrative of progress: human belief develops through time from the more primitive and magical to the more sophisticated and religious. Savage heathens at a less developed stage of civilization believe in magic, while advanced civilizations combat magic.

Discussing African beliefs, Tylor cites a traveler: "...what with slavery and what with black magic, life is precarious among the Wakhutu..." Christine Ammer cites the O.E.D. as noting this is the first instance in English of the term "black magic."

In the same paragraph Tylor slides into a discussion of "witchcraft" in British India and Europe.

In the 13th century, when the spirit of religious persecution had begun to possess all Europe with a dark and cruel madness, the doctrine of witchcraft revived with all its barbaric vigour...the guilt of thus bringing down Europe intellectually and morally to the level of negro Africa lies in the main upon the Roman church...

For Tylor, the discussion of African religious belief immediately calls up the memory of the Catholic persecution of Witchcraft, that is, surviving practices of European Folk Religion. African and European folk practices merge into a single entity in Tylor's polemic. When Europeans practice Witchcraft it brings them down to the level of African people who are (in his eyes) intellectually and morally inferior to the peoples of Europe.

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Despite religious opposition and scholastic contempt, Conjure continued to prosper through the nineteenth century. Black storefront churches supported Conjure. Hurston notes that Spiritualism appealed to root workers who continued to practice the African tradition of communication with the dead. Because Hoodoo practices were illegal in many places, Spiritualist churches provided protective coloration. Chireau notes that black Spiritualist churches provided a livelihood for black mediums and spiritual healers.

Conjure not only mixed with Christianity but with European esotericism. Chireau describes 1930s newspaper advertisements for Conjure practitioners whose credentials included mastery of astrology, numerology, palmistry and hypnotism.

Dr. Hazzard-Donald traces the diffusion of Conjure in the late twentieth century. Storefronts selling Hoodoo supplies and remedies were forced out of business by New Age and occult stores selling crystals and Tarot cards. On the other hand, the internet opened a whole new marketplace for mojo bags, oils and powders.

The anonymity of the internet aids the movement of white people into the Hoodoo marketplace. Partly as a result of this white takeover, Conjure and root working have become respectable; practitioners, mostly white, write books, hold seminars, and command the same authority that Witches and Ceremonial magicians do.

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White profiting from black knowledge has evoked black criticism. Rish de Terra points to this as the latest example of appropriation of African culture by European people. White practitioners present Conjure as a construct of African traditions combined with European magic and Christianity, a multicultural mixture accessible to everyone. De Terra comments that this presentation overlooks the fact that Christianity was imposed on enslaved Africans, and African traditions were stolen from black root workers. This mixing of traditions was not then and is not now consented to by the black practitioners.

Blogger Woodlandangel comments bluntly:

White people should not be taking a practice that offers safety to black people...White people still contribute to a society that oppresses black people, and Voodoo and Hoodoo have been our weapons against that. White people, because of the suffering they cost us, a whole, have no *right* to partake in our practices. It makes absolutely no sense that they do, and it's frankly insulting.

The whitewashing of Conjure extends beyond white people adopting Hoodoo practice and marketing roots and remedies. White practitioners alter the traditions to make them more palatable to white audiences, dropping cursing and other baneful practices.



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While white women and men package commercial practices for white audiences, black practitioners continue to use Conjure to heal, protect and minister to community and family. Dr. Hazzard-Donald interviewed a Conjure doctor who has seen a sharp increase in requests for aid for young black men accused of murder, and in families bringing children to him for a “community sanction” function. She points out that this community function is not served by a mail-order powder. She also notes that Hoodoo practitioners continue to use the traditional African American church networks.

Discussions among contemporary black Hoodoo practitioners happen in corners of the internet that are not accessible to curious white observer, nor should they be.

## Esoteric Blackness

A spiritual tradition based on theft is flawed from inception. White esotericists are long overdue to acknowledge the tradition’s debt to the peoples of Africa, India and North America. Far from being inferior to Europeans, they have been the teachers, providing the knowledge of the material and spiritual world which structures Hermetic practice.

For that reason it would be prudent for seekers to suspect that feeling of noble superiority when we quit the night to seek the day. A more appropriate feeling might be humility. We may achieve the heights of the gods, but we do so with the aid of all the people who came before us, those who were wronged as much as those who were honored.

# White Light, Black Magic: Racism in Esoteric Thought

## The Great White Brotherhood

Black and white identify magical intent. They also identify magical people – there are White and Black Brothers. These ideas were developed by Europeans in the modern period immediately following the age of empire. Given what we now know about the racist origin of color terms they deserve a closer look.

Esotericists today argue that white and black indicate values, not people. White means positive, not European, and black does not have an ethnic connotation. European magicians continue to elect themselves members of the “Great White Brotherhood” while identifying others as “Black Brothers.” When and how did these terms evolve? Did the people who coined the terms mean that the Great White Brotherhood is composed of European men?

Alex Owen notes that the Victorian era was fascinated with new scholastic investigation of Egypt and India, colonies of the European empire. Theosophy played to that fascination with Helena Blavatsky’s adaptation of Western “theosophy”, god-wisdom, to her interpretation of Eastern metaphysics. Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Moina Mathers of the Golden Dawn played to this fascination as well, incorporating Egyptian deity into their rituals and their public performances in Paris. These performances appropriated aspects of colonized cultures just as the British empire appropriated land, resources and people.

The Victorian esoteric orders were patterned on an early modern concept of a lodge of secret masters. We can start our investigation with the root of scientific racism in the formation of the Royal College.

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## The Invisible College

The history of Western science calls the Royal College the first scientific institution. Esoteric history might point to its full name, “The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge,” as a reminder that the men who formed the society were natural philosophers. From the esoteric point of view the Royal Society was the first group of hermeticists who met in public.

Before Boyle co-founded the Royal Society he met with another, more secretive group. In letters written in 1646 and 1647 he mentioned entertaining members of an “invisible college.” He describes these men as humble geniuses who “take the whole body of mankind for their care.”

What was the Invisible College? Robert Lomas argues that it was a Freemasonic lodge. Since Freemasons meet in secret and don’t publish membership rolls, we can’t know definitively if Boyle or any of the Royal Society founders and members were Freemasons. Also, the earliest English Freemasonic lodges are recorded in 1717, nearly 60 years after the founding of the Royal Society and long after Robert Boyle’s death.

The Invisible College might have been inspired by the Brotherhood of the Order of the Rosicrucians. This order was announced to the world in an anonymous 1614 pamphlet titled *Fama Fraternitatis*, followed by the anonymous *Confessio* in 1615. Johannes Valentinus Andreae claimed to have written the third and final pamphlet, the 1616 *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*.

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The *Fama* recounts the adventures of Christian Rosencreutz. After extensive travels in the Orient he founded a school composed of eight “brothers.” They had six guiding principles:

1. They should heal the sick for free.
2. They should dress like everyone else.
3. They should meet on every year on a specific day.
4. Each brother should nominate a successor to replace him.
5. The word C.R. (Christian Rosencreutz) should be their “seal, mark and character.”
6. The fraternity should remain secret for a hundred years.

The publication of the *Fama* touched off a hunt for the members of the secret fraternity, either to expose them or to join them. It is possible that this reaction inspired the Royal Society to be a public group to avoid the negative publicity that surrounded a secret society.

The manifesto claimed the Rosicrucian Society had been in existence for a century. While this is possible, Andreae famously called the Chymical Wedding a “ludibrium” or trivial entertainment, which called the veracity of all the pamphlets into question.

Whether or not the Rosicrucian Society actually existed, the image of a secret order of masters teaching hidden knowledge in service to humanity has proven to have lasting appeal. Numerous groups have aspired to this ideal and have taken the Rosicrucian name.

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## The Society of the Elect

In his 1806 work *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary* the Christian mystic Karl von Eckartshausen announced a Rosicrucian-like group which governed human destiny similar to the Rosicrucian Brotherhood but not using the name. He called this order:

- The Communion of Saints
- The Society of the Elect
- The Invisible Church
- The School of Wisdom
- The Community of Light

Eckartshausen tells us this school has at its head Jesus Christ, who is Wisdom, Truth and Love. The school imparts knowledge of God, nature and humanity. It is hidden and invisible, the interior Sanctuary which powers external churches. God chooses each new member and the existing members are not jealous of this. Any man can show the way to the Sanctuary but only the worthy will successfully enter.

The members of the group are brothers and mahatmas scattered around the world. In the third section of the work, Eckartshausen reveals himself as a member of the group. Throughout the text he identifies knowledge with light. "Sons of truth, there is but one order, but one Brotherhood, but one association of men thinking alike in the one object of acquiring the light." He concludes, "Our Master is the Light itself."

*The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary* had a profound effect on the development of modern esotericism. The first person to be inspired by the work was an extraordinary Russian woman.

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## The Theosophical Society

By the time she was 16 Helena Petrovna had probably been exposed to Eckartshausen's ideas. Biographer Gary Lachman notes that she had by that age read through her great-grandfather's library, which may have contained a copy of *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary*. Her grandfather's friend Prince Alexander Golitsyn, a Freemason and occultist, had read the work and may have discussed it with her.

Prince Golitsyn encouraged the girl to travel to learn. After the brief marriage which gave her the name Blavatsky, she set off to see the world: Greece, Egypt, India. In London, Blavatsky said, she met the first Mahatma who would shape her life, Mahatma Morya or M. In Tibet she met her second great teacher, the Mahatma Koot Hoomi. She corresponded with these Mahatmas through séances and through physical letters.

In 1875 Blavatsky joined with two men, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and William Quan Judge, to found the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky and Olcott established the society's headquarters near Madras, India in 1882. In their travels in India the two met the esoteric author and Buddhist Alfred Percy Sinnett. Sinnett also corresponded physically with the Mahatmas guiding the society; this correspondence was published much later as *Letters from the Mahatmas*.

Blavatsky produced a number of works, including *The Secret Doctrine* and *Keys to Theosophy*. In these she explained the Mahatmas or Masters were members of the Great White Lodge. This fraternity or brotherhood directed the foundation of the society and dictated its teachings. Her successor C.W. Leadbeater renamed the Great White Lodge as the Great White Brotherhood in his 1925 work *The Masters and the Path*.

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Historian Kocku von Stuckrad summarizes Blavatsky's immense influence on esotericism:

- She combined Hermetic theurgy with Buddhist and Hindu thought
- Siting the society's headquarters in India firmed up the Western connection with Eastern mysticism
- Her personal charisma and the quality of her revelations spread her work around the globe.

Blavatsky reported meeting the mahatmas physically and corresponding with them astrally. This has led to accusations that she simply invented them. Biographer K. Paul Johnson takes the interesting approach of providing biographies of the important people in her life, intimating that she created the image of the masters to protect the real identities of her teachers.

The Theosophical Society formed a template for some of the esoteric societies which would follow.

## The Golden Dawn

The next of these was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in 1887 by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, William Wynn Westcott and William Robert Woodman. All three men were Freemasons and members of Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, another group inspired by the Rosicrucian Brotherhood.

Westcott had obtained a manuscript written in cypher. When he cracked the code he established what would eventually become a significant correspondence with a mysterious woman named Anna Sprengel. She in turn was in direct contact with a set of hidden masters similar to Blavatsky's mahatmas, called by the Golden Dawn "Secret Chiefs". Sprengel passed on the authorization from the chiefs to found the Golden Dawn.

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Alex Owen summarizes the structure of the group. Three hierarchical orders provided successive initiations based on the Hermetic Tree of Life (itself derived from the Jewish Qabalah and from African and indigenous Tree of Life traditions). The first or Outer Order offered five initiations: Neophyte, Zeleator, Theoricus, Practicus and Philosophus. The outer order focused on teaching magical correspondences based on the Christianized Qabalah.

Mastery of the outer order material qualified the candidate for invitation to the second or Inner Order, the Rosae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis (ruby rose and gold cross). Once admitted into the RR et AC the member could undergo three additional initiations, Adeptus Minor, Adeptus Major and Adeptus Exemptus. The adepts of the RR et AC strove to embody the Perfect Man infused with Christ Spirit.

The third order, the Hidden Order of Masters, guided the first two orders. The masters communicated to the group through Anna Sprengel who communicated to Westcott. When Westcott reported to Mathers that his correspondence with Anna Sprengel had ended, Mathers promptly established a direct contact with another master, Frater Lux E Tenebris. Westcott confirmed the validity of the contact.

Westcott was forced to resign from the Golden Dawn to retain his civil position as Coroner of the Crown. Golden Dawn member Florence Farr assumed the office of Chief Adept. Alex Owen surmises that Farr later expressed an interest in resigning from the Second Order to work privately with Westcott. For whatever reason, Mathers sent an extraordinary letter to Farr denying that Westcott had ever had legitimate contact with anyone who was in touch with the hidden masters. Only Mathers' own contact with Frater L.E.T. was valid.



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This announcement devastated Farr and other Golden Dawn members. Ultimately the repercussions of this conflict fragmented the original lodge into several successor groups.

One contemporary group, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Outer Order of the Rosicrucian Order of Alpha Omega, has announced that they have re-established contact with the masters. Their web site reports that David Griffin and Jean-Pascal Ruggiu physically met in Paris in 2002 with another master bearing the motto *Frater Lux E Tenebris*. This new Frater L.E.T. gave them initiations and provided new material for the third order. The announcement notes that the current Frater L.E.T. like the previous one is of “high European nobility.”

## The Silver Star

One of the more famous members of the Golden Dawn was Aleister Crowley. He read Eckartshausen’s work at a formative moment in his life. Biographer Richard Kaczynski reports that in 1897 Crowley took the first step into the esoteric world when he bought a copy of Arthur Edward Waite’s *Book of Black Magic and of Pacts*. Crowley wrote Waite who advised him to read *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary*, translated the year before into English.

Electrified by the book, Crowley prayed to God and petitioned the masters to send him guidance. Only a year later Crowley was inducted into the Golden Dawn as a Neophyte. Kaczynski notes that his initiation into the group in 1898 marked his spiritual rebirth.

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Crowley was deeply involved in the split between Florence Farr and Mathers. When the London lodge refused to admit him to the second order, RR et RC, Mathers initiated him. Mathers then sent him to London as his representative to attempt to physically take control of the lodge headquarters. This attempt failed and Crowley ultimately left the Golden Dawn.

Crowley established his own contact with the hidden masters. In 1906 he had a vision in which he saw a group of adepts drinking the blood of a man. A voice told him he would one day join these adepts. In his vision he next entered a hall with a square altar. A voice asked him what he would sacrifice on the altar. He said "all save my will to know Augoeides," that is, his Holy Guardian Angel. He knelt and put his hands on the altar. A white luminous figure appeared before him, put his hands on Crowley's, and said, "I receive thee into the Order of the Silver Star." This white luminous figure directly descends from Robert Boyle's linkage of white, light, and male European superiority.

At that time Crowley and former Golden Dawn member Cecil Jones had been considering forming a new order. In the tradition of esoteric groups like the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn, they needed a third member to launch their group. Crowley's friend John Frederick Charles Fuller consented to be the third, and in 1907 the three men founded the Astrum Argentum, the Silver Star.

Jones hailed Crowley as a master in his own right, the next new Buddha, the prophet of the new age of Thelema. To mark the accomplishment, Jones conducted a ritual which consecrated Crowley a Master of the Temple.

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In 1919 the manifesto of the A.A. appeared in the periodical *Equinox Vol. 3 No 1*. The A.A. was introduced as the “Great White Brotherhood,” further described as a “Body of the highest Initiates, pledged to aid mankind.”

In 1938 in *The Heart of the Master* Crowley reported another vision of the hidden order. A god revealed to him a white marble square containing the image of an eye in a triangle, the symbol of the A.A., the Great White Brotherhood. The god called the roll of some of the masters of the Brotherhood. Among the gods (Apollo, Dionysus, Osiris) and men (Plotinus, Christian Rosencreutz, Sir Edward Kelly) there is one notable female presence. The god told Crowley that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky prepared the way for the “Master whose Word is Thelema.” Blavatsky’s life work was so foundational that she had to be listed among the male figures, even if only to “prepare the way” for Crowley!

Today several groups call themselves Astrum Argentum, tracing lineage back to Crowley through different student-initiates.

## Esoteric Racism

Enlightenment science developed the idea of “white” as a marker of European superiority over African “black” people. When Blavatsky revealed the Great White Lodge, when the Golden Dawn worked to create the Perfect Man, when Crowley published the manifesto of the Great White Brotherhood, did they mean the Great European Lodge, the Great European Man? How did the founders of these groups understand race?

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Karen Swartz summarizes Blavatsky's views on race. In *The Secret Doctrine* Blavatsky describes the development of the monad or young god toward fully adult godhood. The monad has passed through vegetable and animal lives before reincarnating through successive human groups learning the lessons of each. These groups are "Root Races." Each Root Race is led by a Bodhisattva who is a member of the Great White Brotherhood.

The Root Races do not incarnate simultaneously but sequentially. Each is progressively more developed than the last. They overlap; when one race has reached its evolutionary peak it begins to decline and a new Root Race emerges. The previous Root Races persist in dwindling numbers until they finally degenerate and become extinct.

Humanity is currently in the fifth Root Race encompassing the Aryan peoples of Europe, the Middle East, and India. For Blavatsky, Aryans are "god-informed," "civilized," "spiritual" and "advanced," while Africans, Australians, and South-Sea Islanders are "narrow-brained," "semi-human," "inferior" and "lost."

The "inferior" races are in the natural course of dying out. Any catastrophe that occurs to them is a result of their inherent weakness. The mixing of races results in female sterility, a karmic consequence of attempting to extend the life of a race which has passed its time.

It's worth quoting a passage to register the full brutality of Blavatsky's language. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 2, p. 421, she says:

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Mankind is obviously divided into god-informed men and lower human creatures. The intellectual difference between the Aryan and other civilized nations and such savages as the South Sea Islanders, is inexplicable on any other grounds. No amount of culture, nor generations of training amid civilization, could raise such human specimens as the Bushmen, the Vedddhas of Ceylon, and some African tribes, to the same intellectual level as the Aryans, the Semites, and the Turanians so called.

Although it's clear that Blavatsky places many non-white peoples in the "inferior" category, are only white people "god-informed"? After all she is including "Aryan Hindus" and takes "Himalayan" masters. Swartz notes that these descriptions are drawn from a romanticized Western construction of Himalayan and Aryan. Descriptions of the masters describe European characteristics. It is also worth noting that only Europeans received the Mahatma letters.

The Golden Dawn similarly adopted a stance of European superiority. Kocku von Stuckrad marks an Orientalizing aspect in the importation of Jewish Qabbalah in Western mysticism. When Mathers translated *Kabbalah Denudata a s Kabbalah Unveiled* he stepped into the narrative of the dominating European man "unveiling" the wisdom of the East.

Like Blavatsky, Crowley travelled to Egypt and India, studied Buddhism, and incorporated Eastern practices into his work. He understood himself to be a reincarnation of the Egyptian priest Ankh-af-na-Khonsu. Joseph Marino explores Crowley's further self-presentation as the sage "Prince Chiao Khan." Crowley adopted the dress of an Eastern sage to shock Edwardian mores, but the appropriation of cultural identity by an upper class Englishman ends up reinforcing orientalizing stereotypes. Crowley could play the Prince *because* he was English.

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Catherine Yronwode believes Crowley assimilated Blavatsky's conception of "Root Races." Crowley certainly used racist terms to describe people, especially people he disliked. In *The Law is for All* he comments at length on the phrase from the Book of the Law, "the slaves shall serve": "We should give every opportunity to the ambitious, and thereby establish a class of morally and intellectually superior men and women." While his general bent seems to be more classist than racist, the term "slave" in the West calls black people to mind; it was then and is now a racially charged term.

Of course not everyone belongs to the superior class. "We should have no compunction in utilizing the natural qualities of the bulk of mankind," Crowley says. "In this way we shall have a contented class of slaves who will accept the conditions of existence as they really are, and enjoy life with the quiet wisdom of cattle." This again summons the implicitly racial image of the happy plantation black. This line of thought directly descends from Locke's justification of the enslavement of kidnapped Africans.

How are the superior man and woman sorted from the slave? Crowley says, "...bad masters have been artificially created by exactly the same blunder as was responsible for the bad servants. It is essential to teach the masters that each one must discover his own will, and do it." The masters must discover their own will in the Thelemic way. Is this essential for servants too? Then what separates the master from the servants? How does one identify the essential quality of a servant? We can theoretically imagine a class of Thelemic servants whose true will is to be enslaved, but it's hard to find such people in practice outside the bondage and dominance roleplaying communities. It's difficult to find an instance in history of people who accepted physical slavery calmly as their lot. People have been beaten down and suppressed, and they have fought for freedom, but who has volunteered to be enslaved?

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Modern esotericists incorporated Enlightenment science, philosophy, and racism in their work. Blavatsky's "Root Races" characterized entire peoples as inferior and doomed to extinction. All the modern esotericists raided "Oriental" religions and culture as raw material for their own cosmologies, philosophies and rituals.

However, they did not condemn the use of magic itself. Western Christian culture views magic with deep suspicion. Faust made a deal with the devil and practiced the "black art." Christian churches persecuted witches in Europe and Christian pastors preached against Conjure in America. How would Christian esotericists practicing Ceremonial magic prevent themselves from being lumped in with Satanists and Witches?

They distinguished good magic from bad magic. They did so not only by identifying themselves as white magicians, but by painting other magicians as black.

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## Black Brothers

The various avatars of the Great White Brotherhood proclaim themselves to be entirely directed by noble intentions. Individuals self-identify as White Brothers and Masters. The same is not true of the Black Brotherhood; “black” is an accusation that is levelled by “white” brothers against others. So what makes a brother “black”?

## Selfish Magicians

In *The Key to Theosophy* Blavatsky describes the Black Brotherhood: “Brothers of the Shadow, and Dugpas, we call them.” These sorcerers attempt to gain control over the minds of others. In addition to controlling others, Blavatsky defines black magic as “applying to selfish and sinful ends the powers of Occultism.”

In *Secret Teachings of All Ages*, Manly P. Hall meticulously explains the differences between black and white magicians. Ceremonial magic involves controlling spirits. Those who serve the Spirit of Good are white magicians, but black magicians pervert this sacred science, calling on a particular demon to serve them during life in exchange for serving the demon after death.

Just as Blavatsky does, Hall condemns those who use magic for themselves. Black magicians turn their art to their own personal gain. Ceremonial ritual isn't the only form this can take. Prosperity psychology, willpower-building metaphysics, and high pressure salesmanship are all forms of black magic. These ideas are close enough to Hoodoo practices that it begs the question, was Hall familiar with root work and spirit conjuring? The similarity suggests that he may have had explicitly black people in mind.



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For Hall, white and black magicians don't just differ in their intent, they actively oppose each other. Those who follow the left hand path, the path of shadow, do their magic at night. They are locked in perpetual warfare with the followers of the right hand path, the path of the white light.

## Failed Magicians

Aleister Crowley did not have a problem with baneful magic per se. After all the first book he chose to read on his path away from Christianity was Arthur Edward Waite's *Book of Black Magic and of Pacts*. Crowley adopted imagery from the Biblical Book of Revelation which depicts the final battle between good and evil. In this battle Crowley threw in with the other side – he described himself as the Beast and used the number 666. His visions transmuted the Whore of Babylon into the sexually proud Babalon, the Scarlet Woman.

Crowley did however use the term "Black Brother" in *Magick Without Tears*, a series of letters written in 1943 and published in 1954 by Karl Germer. In this work "Black Brother" does not describe a magician working magic for personal gain, or working with demons or baneful spirits. In "Chapter XII: The Left-Hand Path – The 'Black Brothers'" Crowley contrasts the Right Hand Path and the Left Hand Path, the White Adept and the Black Adept, the Great White Brotherhood and the Black Brother.

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Crowley draws a distinction between the black magician or sorcerer and the actual Black Brother. The black magician is “a thwarted disappointed man whose aims are perfectly natural.” Eventually he realizes he is not achieving his aims. Crowley says, “Thereupon he casts away his warlock apparatus like a good little boy, finds the A.:A.:, and lives happily ever after.” The black magician ends up as the White Brother. One cannot help but wonder if this is an autobiographical sketch. Crowley, the black magician, is a White Brother after all.

So how can we tell a true Black Brother? Crowley warns that he is indistinguishable from the White Adept. He may even be an Adeptus Minor and have achieved Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel. But when he comes to the crisis of the Abyss where he is to annihilate himself completely he holds something back. He does not give the last drop of his blood to Babalon’s cup. He fails the test. Crowley specifically applied the term to the A.A. probationer Austin Osman Spare who fell out of favor with Crowley.

Crowley says:

The about-to-be-Black Brother constantly restricts himself; he is satisfied with a very limited ideal; he is afraid of losing his individuality —reminds one of the “Nordic” twaddle about “race-pollution.”

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It is fascinating to find Crowley condemning racism in this context. Catherine Yronwode has documented instances of racist thought in Crowley's early work. In particular she calls out his condemnation of the "admixture of blood" between Europeans and Egyptians, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews. *Magic Without Tears* was his last and posthumously published work. By this time Crowley had served with British intelligence in World War I and had lived through the near-destruction of the Ordo Templi Orientis in World War II. His mature thinking did not align with Nazi ideals.

Crowley used the term Black Brother to describe a magician who has failed the crisis of the Abyss. For Crowley the White Adept is superior, the Black Adept is misguided. This use of the designation "black" is closer to Manly Hall's than Robert Boyle's. Austin Osman Spare, the man Crowley called a Black Brother, was of European heritage, so in this context "black" does not seem to mean "of the black race."

This does not however mean that we should push this term forward in time. Whatever Crowley's intent in designating a certain type of magician as a "Black Brother", his use of the terms white and black to designate types of adepts is clearly embedded in the language which developed to contrast inferior African peoples and religion with superior European peoples and religion. The intent may not have been consciously racist, but the use of color words to describe superior and inferior is inherently racist.

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## White vs. Black

The Great White Brotherhood and Black Brotherhood were developed by Europeans who not only lived in racist cultures but actively promoted racist ideas themselves. Some people who call themselves members of the Great White Brotherhood do in fact assert that black people are inferior to white people. Even when they don't, however, the term is a condemnation. This is problematic.

A Great White Brotherhood *needs* a Black Brotherhood. There has to be someone to oppose. The White Adept self-proclaims magical mastery and simultaneously identifies the enemy. It's important to notice that the opponent has not picked the battle. Whether the enemy has black skin or simply differs in magical outlook, that magician is labeled as black because the white magician *needs them to be*.

The definition of what constitutes black magic has shifted in the last century. Esotericists today no longer condemn prosperity or willpower building magicks. Magic done for one's personal gain has shifted from black to white, from evil to understandable. Instead white magic is that which heals, black magic is that which curses. This distinction is a modern version of the condemnation of Conjure. We have seen that sorcerers use cursing as a form of self-protection. Shannon Barber movingly describes claiming power in white-controlled spaces by accepting the dark along with the light.

What we need today is not a redefinition of white and black, good and evil. We need to walk away from the terms altogether. Prosperity magic, cursing magic, healing and poison are not black. They're just magic.

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## Esoteric Oppression

We have two kinds of masters here and they slip into each other. Some mahatmas, secret chiefs, or saints are discarnate beings who speak through representatives. Others are actual people who self-elect as masters or who are hailed as masters by friends.

The Victorian-Edwardian esoteric orders arose in an era when Spiritualism was legitimate and popular. Some Spiritualists used tricks to convince people that the spirits were real, tricks that could be and were exposed. This discredited the Spiritualist movement and the whole idea that it is possible to communicate with non-physical entities. This exposure resonates today. Entertainers Penn and Teller delight in revealing the tricks behind stage magic precisely to prevent mediums from using them to mislead. Western science scoffs at the credulity of the last century and vows to debunk imposters. Academic researchers routinely describe Blavatsky, Westcott, Mathers and Crowley as deliberate frauds.

Mathers himself threw the whole messages-from-hidden-masters project into question when he told Florence Farr that Westcott had forged the Anna Sprengel correspondence. He asked Florence Farr to accept his letters from Frater Lux E Tenebris as the only legitimate communication with a representative of the Secret Chiefs. But once one contact has been thrown into question, why should another be accepted?

Why do we need masters at all?

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What makes people worthy to be masters, members of the Great White Brotherhood? Because they are white? Because they are male? Because they are European aristocracy? Because they are chosen by God? Because they are anointed by friends? Because they have taken an initiation into the right group?

Donald Michael Kraig was familiar with Crowley's definition of the black brother. Kraig had another definition from his own experience.

Male Black Brothers tend to want to tell everyone they know better than anyone else, they are the link to the God/dess, Hidden Masters, Secret Chiefs, etc. They will marshal their allies and try to take over groups. Often their attacks on others will get wilder and sound crazier and "over the top," turning people off and causing them to flee (they become "enemies" or "traitors" to the Black Brother's true path).

The modern esoteric orders imported the Hindu and Buddhist apparatus of guru and chela. The guru is someone with the right initiation who has achieved a spiritual accomplishment and can guide the chela through the experiences of the path. The guru recognizes pitfalls and helps the chela avoid them. It's a fast track to attainment. This is a perfectly legitimate magical path and the groups that facilitate this relationship do sincere and helpful work.

The Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn, and the Silver Star are all theurgic systems. They all agree that humans are on our way to becoming gods. Every one of us has the capacity to contact the gods or the divine or God. Legitimate teachers show students how to do this for themselves and then get out of the way of the relationship.

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The problem comes when a group decides that it is composed of teachers of humanity who are hidden but walk among us instructing us. Taking the position that every human being is your student enrolls every human being into the guru-chela relationship *non-consensually*. It is a violation of individual will.

Blavatsky was overtly racist. Westcott, Mathers and Crowley raided the "Orient" for gems to stud the crown of magical empire. Those who identify today as members of the Great White Brotherhood have yet to confront the European history of land theft and enslavement. The people they designate as "Black Brothers" may not be African, but the use of black to condemn is the same mechanism used to condemn people of color as less than human.

At best the contemporary Great White Brotherhood has not confronted its racist past. At worst, groups using the term actively embrace white supremacy, engaging in the same rhetoric as other hate groups to denigrate women and people of color. The ancient Rosicrucian ideal to shepherd the wellbeing of all humanity grounds out here in a move to claim magical authority over others for personal benefit. For all the definitions of "Black Brotherhood" we have considered here, this fits the bill.

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## Inclusive Esoteric Language

Contemporary esotericists genuinely committed to advancing the wellbeing of all humans without exception face the challenge of creating an accurate, honest, inclusive language. What can we do to rectify the impact of racism on our thought and practice?

### White light is just light

Encyclopedia.com gives this definition for white light: “apparently colorless light, for example ordinary daylight. It contains all the wavelengths of the visible spectrum at equal intensity.” The adjective “white” to describe “ordinary daylight” does not add to our understanding. Using white as shorthand for light perpetuates the use of white as shorthand for sacred.

Call to action:

Contemporary esotericists genuinely committed to advancing the wellbeing of all humans without exception face the challenge of creating an accurate, honest, inclusive language. What can we do to rectify the impact of racism on our thought and practice?

Rephrase “white light.” Use sunlight, clear light, or yellow light. Remember that the Hermetic value of the sun is gold.

### Explore the rainbow

The contemporary Western scientific stellar classification categorizes suns based on where their light falls on the visible spectrum, from red to blue. Individual stars fall along the spectrum, a vastly more interesting and useful observation than lumping them all into “white.” The spectrum gives us access to the powers of all the planets and to the visible universe.



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It is not an accident that the rainbow was also chosen by the LGBTQ communities to represent the spectrum of human possibilities. It is also noteworthy that the rainbow flag now incorporates brown and black to include people of color.

**Call to action:**

**Use rainbow light.** Match the outcome of a visualization to one of the frequencies of light.

## Black nourishes

Newton's prism refracted ordinary sunlight into the colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet. In Hermetic thought these correspond with Mars, Mercury, sun, Venus, Jupiter, moon. These are six of the seven "planets" (wandering stars as opposed to fixed stars) known to the ancients.

The seventh is Saturn. The Hermetic color for Saturn is black; Newton chose indigo as his seventh color. Until the invention of aniline dyes, the natural dye indigo was used as the darkest of clothing dyes, approximating true black. We can read "indigo" as a variant of "black."

Incorporating black into our practice allows us to recover the gifts of darkness. They are profound. Both night and day are necessary for human health. Body and mind need the darkness to rest from the labors of the day. The black earth grows the food that sustains us. Black feeds us and heals us.

**Call to action:**

**Honor the dark.** Create meditations in which the body is surrounded by soothing darkness and healing silence.

# White Light, Black Magic: Racism in Esoteric Thought

## White and black magic are just magic

The Western Magical Tradition values light as the source of good and condemns shadow as the source of evil. Understanding the racist origins of these correspondences challenges us to move away from binary thinking which exalts one half while demonizing the other. Instead we can understand that both are necessary for balance.

Today's science understands that all human beings are members of the same race. Skin color, like eye color and hair color, gender, and all other physical characteristics are determined by DNA which passes from our parents. When Boyle called the differences between people "seminal" he was on the right track (although they are also "ovumal").

Both Christian and Jewish thinkers challenge the reading of Genesis to justify European slavery of African peoples. In "Misreading the Torah," Alan Yuter points out that God did not curse Ham's children, Noah did. A human curse has a different impact than a divine one.

Reporter Joe Westbury interviewed Grady Caldwell, a black Southern Baptist pastor, on the subject of the curse of Ham. Caldwell challenges the reading of Ham as dark skinned. He also notes that skin color is caused by variations of melanin in the skin. The root word of "melanin" is darkness. The original skin color is black. More importantly, Caldwell says, the relationship of person with God is not with the skin, but with the heart.

Black is not evil, in people or in magic. If we steer ourselves gradually away from metaphors of white and black, light and dark, good and evil, we also steer ourselves away from condemning any person, either for how they look or for the kind of magic they choose to do.

# White Light, Black Magic: Racism in Esoteric Thought

Call to action:

**Question judgement.** Wherever we find ourselves using the term “white” to mean positive, socially acceptable, and sacred, and black as undesirable, ugly and evil, this is a flag to re-examine our thinking and recast our terminology.

## Revelation is personal

Philosophers of science have some work to do in re-evaluating objectivity. The Western scientific method calls on peers to evaluate individual results. With a chemical experiment it is possible for multiple people to achieve the same outcome. When Boyle introduced observations made by others, he suggested that testimony from witnesses could be laid alongside actual experimentation to validate results, but he did not correct for the biases of his witnesses or for his own prejudices. What constitutes a valid observation? We are all embedded in our own times, cultures, and personal histories. Is human objectivity ever actually possible?

Scientific illuminists face the same issue. We evaluate our magick based on the outcomes of scientific experiments and change our formulae to accommodate the new results. We are only beginning to grapple with the effect this methodology has on the idea of perennial philosophy – that there is an eternal unchangeable truth, and that it is possible for humans to know it.

There is one immediate difference to note between Boyle’s approach and contemporary magick. Boyle rejected revelation. This was one of the cornerstones of his thought, fundamental to the Western scientific revolution. Theurgists, on the other hand, credit revelation. The gods speak, and speak directly to humans. On what basis will we evaluate these revelations? What is a credible and acceptable revelation? Which theurgists are credible and acceptable transmitters of revelation?

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Every person is capable of talking to the gods. We may take inspiration from the work of others, and their channeled works may be helpful to us. They do not, however, supercede our own authority and our personal responsibility to make those contacts for ourselves. We need not credit someone else's revelation as more important, valid, or relevant to us than our own.

Instead of working in a hierarchy, we can work in a circle. We can share our results and check each other's work. We can each establish ourselves as humans infused with the divine force and working in community, not secretly holding ourselves superior to each other, but in the clear.

Stand in a dark room. Say:

I am surrounded by the dark. From the darkness I come and to the darkness I return. The healing silence, the nourishing source surrounds me.

Light a yellow candle. Say:

From darkness comes light. The golden power of the sun surrounds me and fills me, me giving life and power.

Close your eyes. Visualize yellow sunlight entering the top of your head, flowing out through your feet, and recirculating to surround your body with a yellow sphere. Breathe in the light of the sun.

Say:

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I invoke the powers that guide me. I will know them when they make themselves known to me. I distinguish between those that help me and those that lead me astray. I seek the path that brings me to the certainty that I am divine and that all people are divine.

See with your inner eyes, listen with your inner ears, and stand quietly to detect any response.

Try this exercise again using all the colors of the spectrum.

Every person has the capacity to grow, learn and change. Theurgy teaches us that all humans are on the road to becoming gods. Each of us is responsible for our own development. Credible teachers can show us the path. We can ourselves exemplify success on that path to inspire others. But none of us has the right to claim control over someone else's life and work, and none of us can escape our work by giving it over to someone else.

White and black are not helpful markers in this context. Skin color and ethnicity do not determine the worth of a teacher or student. European people, white people, have wrought indefensible harm on other humans, while African people, black people, have consistently served as the willing or unwilling source of knowledge and wisdom for the world. We might leverage this uncomfortable realization to challenge the identification of "white" with "good".

The values of white as good and black as evil developed to justify slavery and cannot be divorced from their racist origins. It is our responsibility to shift esoteric language away from color words toward terms that more accurately reflect the lived experience of all esotericists. We are challenged to affirm the truths that we are all our own masters, and the light of the stars is a rainbow.

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