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How Many White People Pass on Racism to Their Children

Racism at Ole Miss exposes racism as an inheritance

Dr. Allison Wiltz Follow 7 min read · 19 hours ago

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Photo of woman in art gallery from Nazar Aslan via Pexels

Some assume that racism is a historical relic, but it's something passed down in the families of white people. In recent years, there have been reports of white students hosting "mock slave auctions," attempting to drown or otherwise physically assault Black children they either attend school with or live by. Hate crimes are pervasive. Still, the rallying cry from many white parents is that discussions about racism cause their children discomfort. But their argument overlooks the negative physical and psychological effects of racial bullying that Black people endure. Let's consider a recent example.

A viral video exposed three white Ole Miss students, identified online as Lauren Mayfield, Sara Whitehead, and Alaina Kunes, harassing Jakiyra Metcalf, a Black student who lives upstairs in the same apartment complex. The Ring doorbell video shows one of the white women beating on her chest while making monkey noises and looking at the door, a second parroting the sounds, and a third standing back, watching. After days of public backlash, Ole Miss officials condemned the behavior as "absolutely disgusting and unacceptable." But they have yet to announce any disciplinary action against the white students involved in this racism. What we're seeing isn't an isolated incident.

Prejudice against Black people is passed down through families, upheld by societal norms, and revived in each generation. Consider, for instance, that Alaina Kunes, one of the students making racially explicit gestures toward a Black student, is the daughter of Scott Kunes, who serves as chief operating officer of Kunes Auto Group, owned by her grandfather, Gregg Kunes. In January 2025, a Black woman, Makayla Starks, took her car in for an oil change at their Oak Creek, Wisconsin, location. But things took a turn for the worse after she discovered the word "n*gger" printed on the sticker employees provide to remind drivers when to get their next oil change.

Initially, dealership staff claimed a mechanic left tools in the car as an excuse to re-enter and remove the sticker at her home, rather than accept responsibility. Once caught red-handed, they apologized and even offered her a car as compensation for the pain and suffering caused. But they failed to acknowledge the broader problem in the company's culture. They said, “This incident stands in stark contrast to who we are as a company.” Yet anti-Black racism is woven into the tapestry of American life, and their company is no exception. The employee likely felt brazen enough to type a slur because of racist statements overheard in the workplace. Firing an individual doesn’t address racism embedded in company culture. Neither would punishing a few students uproot the deeply held prejudice at Ole Miss.

Racism is one of those things, like hair, eye, or skin color, that white people pass on to their children and grandchildren. While it’s a social, rather than a genetic or biological, phenomenon, research has found that white toddlers express racial preferences and, by age four, have associated race with social status. While many white people assume that the only way their children will become racist is if they express prejudice explicitly, the truth is that, in America, anti-Black racism is the default and is entangled in our healthcare, education, banking, criminal justice, and use of technology, so that without intentional effort to address prejudicial thinking, white children view Black people as subordinate to white people before they can write their first sentence. Neutrality in a society inundated with racism upholds societal norms, so simply claiming not to be racist doesn’t get the job done.

Of course, some white people intentionally pass on racism, too. For instance, we know white southerners took some of their children to witness lynchings of Black people during Jim Crow, conditioning them to see violence against Black people as a normal group activity. The Ku Klux Klan, a white

nationalist organization known for terrorizing Black communities, had a junior division called the Ku Klux Kiddies. In the modern era, some white parents are fighting to remove books written by Black authors from the school curriculum to prevent white children from learning about the nation's history of racism, and, in that respect, priming their children to inherit a racist worldview.

According to social psychologist Dr. Leigh Wilton, "if we wait until a child is old enough to ask a tough question about the history of racial violence, then it will be that much harder to talk about if there haven't been any meaningful discussions about race earlier in their lives." So, when white parents complain that discussions about race are "inappropriate" because the topic may cause discomfort, these policies make it more challenging to address the racism they've internalized down the line. White parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents using slurs is not the only way they can pass on racism to their kids. Refusing to discuss race means white children will rely on societal norms, which perpetuate racism.

Mississippi University, or Ole Miss as it's often called, is a hotbed of racist incidents, despite approximately 40% of the student body being Black. This pattern holds in the latest scandal, in which white college students racially harassed a Black student, and in a similar incident two years ago, when a white finance student, JP Staple, taunted a Black student during a protest against violence targeting Palestinians in Gaza by making monkey noises and gestures. When commenting on the incident, conservative legal analyst Phil Holloway posted, "Looks like I'll be adding Ole Miss to the list of colleges to visit with my oldest," revealing his desire to pass racism to the next generation.

While the state of Mississippi is on the cusp of a political milestone, with a Black man, Scott Colom, potentially the first to represent the state in the Senate since the Reconstruction Era, the prejudice that fertilized racist systems like chattel slavery and Jim Crow hasn't dissipated. "Whites-only" signs came down, but the ideology of excluding Black people, of othering and dehumanizing them, has been passed from one generation to the next. Incidents like the one seen in a viral TikTok of white girls taunting a Black student expose the harm of white parents centering the feelings of white students in racial discourse. Doing so overlooks the concerns of Black students, parents, and educators.

During a 1961 radio recording, James Baldwin, the author and activist, said, "to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage," and while this is the most popular snippet, in part because white Americans have always portrayed Black people as angry in a way that removes the context of their statements, he went on to say that "part of this rage" is more than what happens to any individual, "but it's what's happening all around you and all the time in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference of most white people in this country, and their ignorance." It's true that indifference to racism perpetuates the rage of Black people, in a society that often presents itself to the global community as a bastion for equal rights and justice, while overlooking or denying the harmful effects of racism.

Racism is passed on just like hair, eye, and skin color; just like recipes preserved in handwritten cursive letters; just like postcards portraying black bodies hanging from poplar trees; just like Confederate flags, which they slyly call "heritage," despite fighting to maintain slavery; and just like their "Make America Great Again" slogan that taunts Black Americans who know there's nothing great about the nation's racism. Calling Black people monkeys, making noises and gestures associated with these animals, is not random. Far from being a relic, open acts of prejudice in the modern era

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T Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Dr. Cynthia Alease Smith
17 hours ago

> But they have yet to announce any disciplinary action against the white students involved in this racism

And they said they won't make anything they decide to do public either. Translation: accept sizeable check from hugh ranking executive father and do nothing to reprimand the student.

16 1 reply Reply



Victor Horlly
18 hours ago

It's mostly practiced in the school and brought out against themselves

3 Reply



Bertroch
2 hours ago

God, you are so right. In high school during the martyrdom/ lynching of so many as Civil Rights laws passed many had different expectations. Beginning State college in 1969, Kent State, Jackson State, and the ongoing marches/protesting for Civil... more

1 Reply

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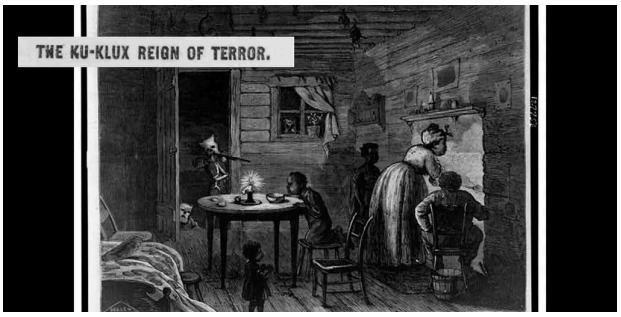


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